

SEEKING THE LOST CHILDREN OF CHRISTENDOM  
MAKING THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE EXPLICIT IN WORSHIP

A THESIS-PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF  
GORDON-CONWELL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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MAY 2018



With grateful appreciation to the patient and trusting family of God's  
children gathered at  
Trinity Presbyterian Church  
Travelers Rest, SC

And with thanksgiving to my loving, supportive, and patient covenant  
for life partner  
Leslie B. Mason.

Without whom this Thesis-Project would never have happened.  
To God be all the glory.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With a joyful heart, I give thanks to God for his servant Reverend Doctor Paul Detterman. His understanding of how and why we worship God has inspired me to delve deeply into both ancient, and modern, expressions of how and why we worship the risen Christ!

Equally, it has been Reverend Doctor James Singleton's unflagging conviction that it is God's revealed truth in Scripture alone that has the power to renew both congregations, and the individuals within them, that has guided me and supported me in this thesis-project.

## ABSTRACT

This Thesis-project seeks to discover if by intentionally planning and implementing worship that explicitly and deliberately seeks to invite people to live into God's biblical narrative will encourage a congregation to make that narrative its definitive source for transformation. Moreover, I hope to discover whether this can happen in traditional and less traditional forms of explicitly biblical worship. Scripture reveals that particular forms and expressions of human worship have evolved and transformed in human history. From ancient tabernacles, to modern cavernous auditoriums, we respond to God with acts of worship. The subject of this Thesis-Project is to explore what the content of that worship should be in our rapidly changing cultural context.

## CHAPTER 1

### CULTURAL CONTEXT AND SETTING

#### Introduction

A number of years ago I had an experience while teaching an adult Bible study that made a deep impression on me. While teaching a group of adults (all 50 years old, or older) I shared with them something I teach Confirmands about how and why we worship the way we do in our Presbyterian church. Pointing to the outline of the Service for the Lord's Day as found in our Presbyterian Church (USA) Book of Common Worship, I move step by step through the movements of the service with the Confirmands, starting with the Call to Worship and ending with the Benediction.

Here is what I share with Confirmands in the Confirmation classes I teach. The Service for the Lord's Day contains a set of internal biblical and theological assumptions which are believed to actually reflect how we experience God in our individual discipleship. First, we become aware of the reality of God, and so we gather to worship him with others similarly aware. As this awareness grows we come to realize that our lives do not conform to God's will, and so we corporately and individually, confess our sinfulness. The time of confession is followed by an assurance of pardon which reminds us that God continues to claim us and love us through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Having heard the assurance of pardon, we are

now ready to receive more of God's will as revealed in Scripture. After reading from Scripture, a sermon is offered explaining how the Scripture passage connects our individual narrative with God's revealed narrative for our lives. In response, we offer our thanksgiving through an affirmation of faith, a corporate prayer (the Prayers of the People) in which we frame our lives as a part of God's creation and Providence is shared. Following these responses to God's Word, we make our offerings. A benediction is offered proclaiming our Christian identity as we are about to conclude worship and re-enter the world.

In summary, we gather because we are aware of God. We recognize that we fall short of what God intends. We receive assurance that God claims us. We hear more of God's story. We respond to God's story. We go from worship with our identity as a child of God blessed. It is this internally coherent biblical and theological foundation for worship that I hope the Confirmands will absorb and internalize.

After I shared this summary of how and why we worship in this way, a woman in her mid-seventies raised her hand to speak, and she said, *"I have worshipped all my life and I HAVE NEVER UNDERSTOOD worship as you have described it. Is there some way you could share all this with the whole church?"* Her response and question struck a strong chord in me. We in the church need to be much more dedicated to making explicit that which is implicit in our worship: God's Story. In large part, this Doctor of Ministry Thesis-Project is my effort to answer her

concern.

Within mainline Christianity a significant number of congregations, including the one I serve, Trinity Presbyterian Church (PCUSA), Travelers Rest SC, approach the act of worship tacitly assuming that people who come to worship already know God's story as revealed in the Bible. It is assumed that people attending worship already know and accept God's narrative for human life as it is reflected in the elements and order of worship in the Service for the Lord's Day. Therefore, telling the story of God as revealed in the Bible through their worship is not considered an explicit task of worship. It is not that the biblical narrative is absent in the worship life of this and other congregations who worship with this format, rather it is that God's revealed narrative is not explicitly proclaimed as a central goal in their congregational worship. Indeed, the biblical narrative is embedded in this form of congregational worship, but is not overtly proclaimed as authoritative for their life together.

In place of the unique biblical narrative, the story told is not explicitly an invitation for human transformation as found in the Bible, but is often more oriented toward individual self-improvement, or self-liberation, based on a contemporary cultural narrative that is grounded in an extra-biblical narrative defined by human experience, not the revealed truth of scripture.

While individual improvement toward a more liberated life is a fine goal,

when such a pursuit does not begin with a fundamental acknowledgment that the God revealed in the Bible is radically other from human experience and reason, then any transformation which may in turn result will not be a life transformed in accord with the revealed truth of the Bible.

While our need to challenge the dominant cultural assumptions in which we live is urgent, it is not new. Others have also recognized the need to challenge cultural assumptions. One prominent example can be found in the work of New England theologian and preacher Jonathan Edwards. In George Marsden's biography of Jonathan Edwards's life and work, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, he wrote to understand Edwards and his work as an 18<sup>th</sup> century person in context and conversation with Edwards's contemporaries, rather than trying to understand Edwards from our present cultural moment.<sup>1</sup>

In chapter 28 of this work entitled "*Challenging the Presumptions of the Age*," Marsden examined how Edwards sought to challenge the work of Scottish and English writers such as David Hume and John Locke, as well as others. These writers were seeking to establish a philosophical and ethical basis for human life – without reference to the revealed will of God presented in the bible.<sup>2</sup> Marsden wrote,

Edwards addressed *The Nature of True Virtue* to the 18<sup>th</sup>-century philosophers. Although he paired it with a theological treatise, he kept the theology of *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World* as broadly Christian as he could, so as to establish a wide foundation for his

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<sup>1</sup> George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (Harrisonburg, VA: R.R. Donnelly and Sons, 2003), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 464.

philosophical analysis of virtue. Unlike his other works, in *The Nature of True Virtue* Edwards did not quote Scripture, although he did appeal to its authority for the theistic basis of his ethics. His object was to establish an analysis in which if one granted merely a few essential principles of Christian theology, one would be forced to reconsider the whole direction of 18<sup>th</sup>-century moral philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

As congregations consider the task of planning and implementing worship in our present cultural moment, their task is not dissimilar from Edward's efforts. Can our worship assert a counter narrative to the dominant cultural assumptions that surround us? Given our present cultural context, congregations today remain called to challenge the "Presumptions of the Age," by making primary the exposition of God's revealed narrative as found in the Bible.

### **Thesis-Project Summary Statement**

I intend to investigate whether by intentionally planning and implementing worship that explicitly and deliberately seeks to invite people to live into God's biblical narrative will encourage a congregation to make that narrative its definitive source for transformation. Moreover, I hope to discover whether this can happen in traditional and less traditional forms of explicitly biblical worship.

### **What Shall Guide Our Transformation?**

The question of how an individual congregation transforms is a significant issue in our rapidly changing cultural context. What I hope to discover is whether congregational worship which explicitly seeks to tell God's narrative as revealed in

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<sup>3</sup> Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 464.

the Bible, can serve as a definitive source of transformation for both individuals and the congregations they worship within. Despite the daunting complexities and vexing ambiguities of our postmodern, or late-modern, cultural context the question of transformation is certainly not a new question for congregations. Given the dynamic character of God, and the ever-changing inherent dynamic character of human life, congregations have always faced the necessity of deciding how they will be transformed. Human culture is dynamic and fluid; always changing. So, the question is not whether or not a congregation will change, or experience transformation. The question more precisely stated is how will a congregation be transformed from the present into the future? Will it be transformed according to God's revealed biblical narrative - or by the cultural circumstances, and narrative, in which it lives?

The central theological claim of the Bible is that the God revealed is radically other than our human experience. The God revealed in the Bible is not discovered through human intellect or deduction. While God's creative power can be seen in the wonders of creation, and in the dynamics of human relationships; it is only in the Bible where God reveals who God is, and who we are in relation to God's radical otherness. John Calvin in his *Institutes of The Christian Religion* Chapter 6, wrote the following concerning the unique role of the Bible for those seeking to know God.

That brightness which is borne upon the eyes of all men both in heaven and on earth is more than enough to withdraw all support from men's ingratitude – just as God, to involve the human race in the same guilt, sets forth to all without exception his presence portrayed in his creatures.

Despite this, it is needful that another and better help be added to direct us aright to the very Creator of the universe. It was not in vain, then, that he added the light of his Word by which to become known unto salvation; and he regarded as worthy of this privilege those whom he pleased to gather more closely and intimately to himself. For because he saw the minds of all men tossed and agitated, after he chose the Jews as his very own flock, he fenced them about that they might not sink into oblivion as others had. With good reason he holds us by the same means in the pure knowledge of himself, since otherwise even those who seem to stand firm before all others would soon melt away. Just as old bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God. This, therefore, is a special gift where God, to instruct the church, not merely uses mute teachers, but also opens his most hallowed lips. Not only does he teach the elect to look upon a god, but also shows himself, as the God upon whom they are to look.<sup>4</sup>

So, for John Calvin, it is only in Scripture that we can truly discover God, not in nature, nor in our experiences. Calvin's point here is that God is known through God's revealed Word as found uniquely in the Bible. It is not that we human beings cannot discern some evidence of God in the wonders of nature, or perhaps even in the musings of the human imagination. However, the definitive discovery of who God truly is, and what is his will, comes only through the revealed narrative of the Bible.

The opening chapters of Genesis reveal that God is transcendent from

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<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Volume*, 4.1.1, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1960), 69-70.

humanity and the creation itself. God is the author of creation, and is in no way a subject within it. Genesis stakes out that claim, and the biblical narrative of God's activity in the creation which follows reinforces that claim throughout. The essential biblical claim is that truth of God comes from God, never from our experiences in creation.

Beginning with God's call to Abram in Genesis 12, the Bible calls us to live in ways that are radically different from the dominant cultural narrative of human life surrounding us, regardless of whatever point in history we may live. The Bible calls us to define who we are and what we do in accord with its revealed truth, not our experience. While obviously quite different in material expression and form, our cultural situation in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, in the United States is not ontologically different from the cultural situation Abram faced in Haran as God called out to him.

As Genesis 12 reveals, responding to God, Abram left Haran to follow God's call. In so doing, Abram allowed God's call to define his life contrary to cultural expectations around him. Abram's story gives witness that when we become aware of, and receive God's call to follow him, we respond to God's call. So, the key question for a congregation, and the individuals that constitute it, is this: How can it live following God's revealed will in distinction from the cultural circumstances and expectations around us?

With this in mind, the root challenge for a congregation today is not

fundamentally different from the challenge it has always faced: Does it place its basic trust and belief in the transformative message of the triune God uniquely revealed through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the Bible, or does it allow the prevailing cultural wisdom of present circumstance shape and form its very life? How a congregation answers this question determines whether or not it will follow a path of genuine biblical transformation. Indeed, as noted in the example of God's call to Abram to leave Haran, the call of God to his people is to shape and form human life according to his revealed will, and not in conformity with influences independent of God's revealed will.

The God revealed across the pages of the Bible calls us to be uniquely and exclusively transformed in accord with his revealed truth of who we are as human beings. It is only in the Bible that we discover the revealed divine narrative that defines who God is and what God desires. We are not born with an innate knowledge of who the God of the Bible is, nor are we born with an innate knowledge of who are in relation to the revealed God of the Bible. To learn who God is, and who we are, as revealed in the Bible, we must look exclusively to God's revealed truth as we receive it through the pages of Scripture. Therefore, a biblically anchored form of worship will, in a disciplined and intentional manner, seek to make explicit God's revealed narrative as the content of worship, if the goal is transformation in accord with God's will.

The God revealed in the Bible is radically other than our limited human experience of life and death; whereby everything once alive is one day no more. In this way, the God of Scripture is something other than a slightly larger and more powerful version of humanity as we know it. As it is revealed in the Bible, God's story, or narrative, of creation and human life is not derived from nor predicated upon our common human reservoir of experience. God's story is not discovered in human learning or wisdom. Nor is God's story discovered in nature. As such, it is only found in the Bible. God's revealed story is uniquely and definitively revealed only in the Bible. So, to live faithfully in accord with God's story we must first encounter it and learn it from the Bible, and then remain anchored in its revealed truth of who God is and who we are as human beings as we seek to worship him.

One primary challenge a congregation faces in our cultural context if it desires to make God's narrative central to worship is that many among us do not know the biblical story. This poses a significant obstacle for a congregation seeking biblically anchored transformative worship: How can it make God's narrative the source of worship if God's narrative is not already known? The answer: incorporate the explicit and overt telling, and retelling of God's narrative in worship.

A lack of understanding and awareness of God's revealed narrative for human life is often true for both those from outside a worshipping congregation, and of those from within it. It has become clear, that even for many within communities

of faith, the story they assume they know about God is guided more by their cultural assumptions (often unexamined) concerning human life, and not the revealed will of God as presented in the Bible.

For example, author Brian McLaren in his book, *A New Kind of Christianity*, argued that the Bible should be considered as something more akin to a Wikipedia resource, wherein the content can be edited in light of personal experiences or perspectives, rather than as an authority revealing transcendent truth.<sup>5</sup> In practice, this lack of accepting God's radical otherness and sovereignty as definitively revealed in the Bible over all of creation makes it possible to ignore elements of God's will for human life that may challenge personal experience and personal proclivities. This is especially the case when God's will arises in direct conflict with dominant cultural norms which have emerged from outside the biblical witness.

With a perspective such as McLaren's as a starting point, essentially God's story becomes a matter of choice for how to live, not an external transcendent truth that is received, is definitive, and serves as authoritative for how to shape and form human life. To put the matter plainly, too often in the worship life of a congregation, the primary biblical narrative of God's story no longer functions to establish the parameters for our core human identity. In its place operates a narrative of human self-improvement based not on the revealed truth of the Bible, but on a cultural

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<sup>5</sup> Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2010), 81.

narrative that is grounded in the extra-biblical notion that human experience, not revealed truth, is authoritative for a faithful life.

In our present North American modern, or postmodern cultural moment, the dominant cultural anthropology (anthropology used in this context is intended to refer to how individuals understand who they are in relation to others, and to the world in which they live) that shapes and forms many people's worldview (even many professing Christians) is not grounded in a biblical worldview, understanding God as creator and sovereign and human beings as his subject creation. Supplanting a biblical worldview is a worldview anchored in the rise of Enlightenment thinking (which in turn is anchored in the ancient Greek philosophy of Epicureanism) wherein each individual is understood as a discrete and sovereign autonomous individual capable of discerning truth based on personal preference and experience.<sup>6</sup>

Standing in sharp contrast to this cultural anthropology are the claims of Scripture that both truth (our individual particular lives), and Truth (that which is the same for all), for us as human beings is not discovered through our thoughts or our experiences, but is received as revelation from the God we encounter in the Bible. From within an authentic biblical worldview all truth comes from God. It follows then, that truly transformative biblical worship is only possible when it is anchored in this biblical worldview. If a view of Scripture such as McLaren's is the starting point,

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<sup>6</sup> N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Scripture: Engaging Contemporary Issues* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2014), 7-12.

then Scripture is understood as a conversation partner with human experience, not an authoritative framework for human life. Transformation will still occur, but it will not be grounded in God's narrative.

The cultural context in which many, if not most, congregations worship today is not reflective of a biblical worldview. Rather, the worship in many congregations is influenced by the cultural anthropology of an Epicurean/Enlightenment worldview which is carried deep within those who arrive for worship. In this worldview, each individual is free to determine absolute right and absolute wrong, not grounded in any external authority but rather in personal experience and preference.<sup>7</sup>

This disconnect between a biblical worldview and the worldview of our dominant cultural anthropology has created a myriad of issues for congregations ranging from personal and sexual ethics to matters of stewardship. However, it is in the act of worship that that this disconnect can be witnessed with clarity. For example, when God's narrative for who we are is replaced with a narrative informed by a culture of endless choice, the proclamation of God's will is then a topic of choice – not obedience.<sup>8</sup>

One outcome of this situation is that congregations often experience endless controversy over the authority of Scripture. While the claim of the Bible is that it is

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<sup>7</sup> N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Scripture*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Scott Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of God-centered Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 52.

the truth of God, this character of Scripture is not always central in the life of congregations. The obstacle is this: It is a challenge to embrace an authoritative view of Scripture in a culture where each individual is considered capable of discerning absolute right and wrong based on their experiences, without appealing to an external transcendent source. In this cultural context, whenever biblical revelation is presented it is only accepted as “true” when it agrees with our personal experience.

Another result of this dominant Epicurean/Enlightenment worldview is that many outside the church simply dismiss the Bible as an external authority and source for forming, and informing, our lives in any way. Human life is conceived as merely a series of choices, and a biblical Christian worldview is considered merely one option among others. Interestingly, even from some within worshipping communities it is considered a choice whether to embrace God’s revealed will, and obey it in our thoughts and deeds; a choice predicated upon whether it agrees with personal experience.

In this worldview, then, truth, or Truth, is simply a matter of what seems agreeable to me based on my experiences and personal proclivities, or even more insidiously, on what can be determined by the scientific method and rational thought of human reason. This cultural anthropological worldview is fundamentally incompatible with a biblical worldview which asserts that God, and God alone, is the author of truth, and Truth. Whenever we depart from the exclusivity of the biblical

narrative for human life in worship, we also abandon the possibility of seeking transformation grounded in the transcendent external revelation of the Bible. The Bible asserts that it is God who determines the truth of human life, not our experiences. When we allow our experience to define truth, we have departed from the biblical witness.

Given the reality that the dominant Epicurean/Enlightenment anthropology in our cultural context often goes unexamined and unchallenged, it is not surprising that the contemporary transformation experienced through worship in many local churches is not informed and shaped by Scripture (a biblical worldview), but rather is informed and shaped by the prevailing cultural anthropology (which, in its origins is pagan and pre-Christian).<sup>9</sup>

As long as congregations fail to recognize, and name, that the prevailing worldview of people in our context is at its foundation, antithetical and contrary to a biblical worldview, our worship life will languish. We will be answering “church” questions with our worship in a cultural context that is not asking “church” questions.<sup>10</sup>

If, we fail to confront this dissonance between a biblically anchored theological anthropology and the dominant Epicurean/Enlightenment cultural

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<sup>9</sup> NT Wright, *Surprised by Scripture*, 18.

<sup>10</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 48.

anthropology, our worship will inevitably be shaped and experienced merely as a pale reflection of the culture around it. Our worship will continue to experience decline and rejection by many individuals and the culture at large, and witness a lack of passionate conviction from those who have responded to the call of God and participate in the life of a local church.

Recognizing that many either ignore or find unappealing Christian faith in our culture, congregations have attempted to address this situation in a variety of ways. We can point to a long track record of congregations adopting various approaches to accommodate the dominant Epicurean/Enlightenment worldview that has emerged in our Western culture and still proclaim the authority of the Bible as our definitive guide for transformation (change).

For example, in the 1800's, with the rise of the historical critical methodology to examine scripture, we see an effort made to adopt the basic assumptions of scientific inquiry in order to better understand the revelatory claims of the Bible within modernity.<sup>11</sup> Yet, instead of transforming local churches to a greater biblical worldview and transformative worship, we have witnessed the rise of an academic discipline approaching scripture not as revealed text but as literature; in many cases completely removed from a worshipping community. The result? A reduction and decentering of the Bible's authority in the life of congregations.

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<sup>11</sup> Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1984), 632.

Then, in the 1890's and on into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we can see the development of what was called the "Social Gospel", most notably exemplified in the writings of Walter Rauschenbusch.<sup>12</sup> The "Social Gospel" approach adopted the humanist epistemology that assumed if the church could provide and encourage healthy bodies and meet basic human physical needs, then a biblical worldview would follow (e.g. the YMCA movement). Within the "Social Gospel" mindset, individuals would experience transformation toward the kingdom of God and the result would be a transformation of "sound minds and bodies." However, what evolved was a mostly secular based effort to foster and encourage social engineering for a better society – not necessarily a transformed biblical worldview, or transformative worship within congregations. The Social Gospel movement did not critique the Epicurean/Enlightenment worldview regarding the ultimate sovereignty and autonomy of the individual, but sought to accommodate it.

The revivalist movement which also emerged in the late 1800's and was sustained into the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, notably represented by evangelists Billy Sunday and Dwight L Moody is another example of how congregations sought to counter a decline in participation and support. These men, and others, pushed for personal repentance and the rejection of perceived moral failings such as drinking alcohol and using tobacco, and a commitment to personal purity in thought and

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<sup>12</sup>Roland H. Bainton, *Christianity* (New York, NY: American Heritage, 1985), 361.

deed regarding sexual activity. This type of revivalism pursued transformation by exhorting an increased individual obedience to a moral code and the need for a ticket to heaven.<sup>13</sup> However, the revivalism movement did not critique the Epicurean/Enlightenment notion of the self as a free sovereign moral agent existing in a world of ethical options available for how to live life. In revivalism, transformation does not happen as response to God's call, it happens through personal obedience (moral choices). In effect, revivalism does not challenge the extra-biblical view of the individual as a sovereign moral agent, but indeed, reinforces it by emphasizing individual choice over the biblical concept of the sovereignty of God and his prevenient grace.

More recently, two related but distinct approaches to transformation have appeared. The Church Growth (1960's- 1970's) and Attractional Church (1980's - 2017) movements have both attempted to guide transformation in the local church by adopting the techniques and methodology of our consumerist culture.<sup>14</sup> Emphasizing high quality production values for worship, attractive physical plants, and winsome clergy leadership, these efforts have sought to reverse the decline in congregations. Within these perspectives it was hoped that transformation of the local congregation would occur as individuals would choose to attend and

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<sup>13</sup> James Singleton, *Silver Bullets*. January 14, 2014. Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary. Hamilton MA. Lecture.

<sup>14</sup> Singleton, Lecture. January 14, 2014.

participate in one local church over another, or over the choice of not participating in worship at all. Again, as with previous efforts at transforming the local church the Epicurean/Enlightenment understanding of the self as an autonomous free agent goes unchallenged and the existing cultural anthropology of our context is either ignored and/or accommodated. The Epicurean/Enlightenment notion of an autonomous individual exercising sovereignty and making a series of choices is reinforced and preserved. An overlay of Christian rhetoric is added to these consumerist efforts attempting to mask an architectonic dissonance with a biblical theological anthropology.

Often, the result of these two approaches is that worship becomes a time of entertainment (something we watch), not as an invitation to participate in God's revealed narrative for human life. Again, the Epicurean/Enlightenment worldview and its notion of discrete sovereign moral agents making choices is not confronted or critiqued, but in fact is affirmed. Worship participation becomes a matter of choosing a church that best coincides with personal experiences and proclivities.

Each of these approaches to encourage change, or transformation, in the local congregation has assumed, whether it be from a self-identified "conservative" or "liberal" theological perspective, that our cultural context is Christendom. While Christendom can be defined in a variety of ways, perhaps the simplest is to say that since the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity sometime in the

early 300's AD, and Christian worship was legalized within the Roman Empire, Christianity has experienced a privileged position in Western culture as the presumed dominant worldview in society.<sup>15</sup> In Christendom, it is assumed that individuals have adopted a biblical worldview which informs and anchors their life, and the culture surrounding congregations is anchored in a Christian worldview. In Christendom, it is assumed that people already know God's story as revealed in the Bible. It is assumed that a theological anthropological worldview is dominant. If this assumption was ever at any point valid, it is clearly no longer the case as evidenced by the numerical decline and cultural marginalization experienced by most mainline denominations in the United States and Canada.<sup>16</sup>

In order to initiate and implement a radical transformation in local congregations that is anchored in the biblical witness of a community called out from its existing cultural context in order to respond to God, and not to be transformed merely to the image of the world around it, it will be necessary in our worship to identify and challenge our dominant cultural anthropology (Epicurean/Enlightenment), and to point to how a biblical worldview is distinct from it.

As our culture unhinges from Christendom the need for a new paradigm for

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<sup>15</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2011), 174.

<sup>16</sup> Darrell L. Guder and Lois Barrett, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998), 2.

approaching and implementing congregational worship becomes ever more important. This cannot be done simply at the level of method and problem solving, because those approaches do not address the underlying cultural anthropology (e.g. Historical Critical Methodology regarding Scripture, Attractional approaches etc.). The challenge of seeking biblical transformation for worship in the local church is both a spiritual and theological task.<sup>17</sup> What is needed is for the church to engage in an “adaptive change” process regarding how we understand and conduct our worship.<sup>18</sup> This means a change in how we approach the task of planning worship, and how we implement it. It is a change in what we intend worship to be and do.

From within the professed Christian community spanning across the theological spectrum from “conservative” to “liberal” there is widespread acknowledgment that the methodologies and assumptions used in the past by congregations to proclaim and tell God’s story, as revealed in the Bible, lack the power and persuasiveness to successfully penetrate the hearts and minds of people. Alan Roxburgh in his book, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*, points to an example of his experience watching the activities of people on a busy Sunday morning in the neighborhood of False Creek near Vancouver Canada. As he watched the neighborhood that Sunday morning, the area was teeming with people going

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<sup>17</sup> Guder, *Missional Church*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Martin Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business, 2009), 14.

about their lives. All the while, in two nearby congregations relatively small numbers of people had gathered for worship. His point is simple: Many, if not most, people in our culture simply no longer even consider participating in Christian worship as a meaningful event in their lives.<sup>19</sup>

So, then, the question is: In our worship, how do we encourage and foster transformation in accord with an authentic biblical worldview that critiques and exposes the dominant Epicurean/Enlightenment worldview (cultural anthropology)? How do we plan and conduct worship that allows people to grasp why it is meaningful for their lives? We must transform our intent in worship from merely responding to a story we already know, to understanding worship as the task of telling a story that is unknown.

The adaptive change necessary for a congregation's worship is that worship be clearly anchored in a radically different worldview than the world around it. Such worship will present a distinct notion of human life if it hopes to counter and critique understandings of human life that come from outside of the Bible. Worship in this way will be anchored in God's unique revelation discovered only in the Bible. Robert Webber, in his book *Ancient-Future Worship; Proclaiming and Enacting God's Narrative*, wrote, "In summary, here is what biblical worship does: It remembers God's work in the past, anticipates God's rule over all creation, and actualizes both

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<sup>19</sup> Roxburgh, *Missional*, 23.

past and future in the present to transform persons, communities, and the world.”<sup>20</sup>

His point is that true biblical worship is always about enacting God’s story, as revealed in the Bible. Regardless of what our particular worship sounds like, or what it looks like, no matter if it is Abram responding to God in Haran long ago, or a community of faith worshipping in North America in 2017, the content of true biblical worship is always focused on God, and his story revealed for us. Worship so perceived will be an adaptive change for how congregations approach the task of worship in a fading Christendom cultural context.

Growing out of his understanding of the biblical witness Webber believed that in a fundamental way, the act of worship is the task of remembering God’s past actions and anticipating God’s future actions while we are in the present. Webber wrote, “In worship we remember God’s story in the past and anticipate God’s story in the future.”<sup>21</sup> Another way to express his thought is to say that in worship we focus on God’s narrative, and not our own. So, worship is not “about” us, it is “about” God. Specifically, it is the telling of God’s revelatory actions through the people of Israel, the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, and in the marvelous act of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, that is our task in worship. Webber wrote “Worship does God’s story.”<sup>22</sup> So, how do we explicitly “do” God’s story in worship?

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Webber, *Ancient Future Worship; Proclaiming and Enacting God’s Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984), 42.

<sup>21</sup> Webber, *Ancient Future Worship*, 23.

<sup>22</sup> Webber, *Ancient Future Worship*, 29.

### **One Congregation's Response to Cultural Circumstances**

Toward the goal of offering worship that is anchored explicitly in God's narrative as revealed in the Bible, in the congregation that I serve we have felt called to transform one of our services from a traditional Service for the Lord's Day format as found in the 1993 Presbyterian Church (USA) Book of Common Worship. The new service is more informal with a simpler format. This service employs different instrumentation, music, and preaching stance from our traditional service. Our traditional service uses a printed order of worship featuring a call to worship, call to confession, prayer of confession, assurance of pardon, several readings from scripture, sermon of 10-12 minutes in duration, affirmation of faith, offering, and three hymns from the Presbyterian Church (USA) hymnal.

In contrast, our new service is conducted with no printed order, a sermon of 15-20 minutes, no affirmation of faith, and has a much more diverse and lively musical format. In doing so, we have intentionally and quite deliberately created a worship format that seeks to follow the historic order of the Service for the Lord's Day without the expectation that worshippers are familiar with God's story or with Christian worship. The intent is to follow the ancient biblical structure for worship by inviting worshippers to "live into each worship moment" as it moves from gathering, to Word, to sacrament, to response, and to sending, rather than to check off the

items in the bulletin. It is a disciplined and intentional effort to present God's revealed story, and narrative for human life, as the primary content and goal of worship.

We refer to this service as First Worship. First, the name was chosen to indicate its place in the congregation's Sunday morning schedule. Second, the name was also chosen to communicate that in response to God's activity in our lives we are called to "first worship". This worship service is a deliberate and intentional effort to invite worshippers to respond to God's call to live in a counter narrative from the culture around them. From start to finish, it is intended to offer a transformative event in accord with God's narrative for those in worship. Unlike at our 11:00 service, as this service moves from a call to worship to each successive element of worship a word of explanation is offered to frame and introduce the meaning and significance of what is happening. So, worship is presented as a cohesive unified narrative flowing from one moment to the next, not as discrete movements which appear to simply happen one after another.

First Worship has a very different energy level and emotional sense than our traditional Service for the Lord's Day service – yet it retains the *four-fold ordo*, and it is held in the same space as our traditional service at 11:00.<sup>23</sup> The only physical change in the traditional space has been the installation of video projection

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<sup>23</sup> Clayton J. Schmit, *Sent and Gathered: A Worship Manual for the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 24.

capability. The video projection equipment is used for First Worship, but not at the traditional service which takes place later in the morning. Using the video projection for the corporate prayers and song lyrics accomplishes two things. First, people have their eyes and faces forward and open to the room, rather than facing down at the hymnal and worship folder, and thereby physically closed off to what is happening around them. Second, the movements of worship are experienced in a sustained narrative fashion in “the moment they are occurring”, rather than anticipated by a written order. Not unlike how singing is “sustained speech” connecting one word with the next, so First Worship unfolds with a connecting narrative thread explicitly presented.

### **Most Sunday Mornings This is What Happens at First Worship**

There is a “welcome team” of 2-4 people to greet worshippers as they arrive. There are no “ushers”. The “welcome team” members are encouraged to dress casually and to be ready to share information as to the location of the child care area, and other facilities available for worshippers.

At the start of worship, we have a lively gathering time of music in which people are invited to stand. We welcome those who have come. We make clear that while they may be unsure of why they have come (an acknowledgment that those in attendance may not yet know God’s narrative), we believe that it is God who has called them to worship him. This is intended to counter the cultural narrative of

autonomous individual sovereignty. We keep spoken church announcements to a minimum, relying on a power point looping slide show which begins approximately 15 minutes prior to the start of worship. We have gathered to worship, not announce programs.

We have a call to worship that makes clear that God is creator and it is God who is at work in the world. Most Sundays this is a responsive call, often an adaptation from a Psalm.

We have an extended period of standing and singing. Our worship leader/musician leads this portion of our worship interspersing scripture and prayer between the songs. The hymnals are never used. Everything is projected on video screens at the front of the sanctuary allowing people to simply interact with what is happening, not spend time anticipating the next verse in the hymnal.

We invite worshippers to recognize that they are sinful people. We try to draw a distinction between the lack of grace and forgiveness in the world, with the clear witness of the Bible that God invites our confession with the assurance that in the Bible God has promised that we are already forgiven, even before we seek his grace. A unison prayer of confession happens.

There is no formal “assurance of pardon” as with the Service for the Lord’s Day. Rather, there is a song whose text communicates the message of God’s grace. By singing the “assurance” worshippers participate and receive the “assurance” by

claiming it in song. Our intent is to invite the worshipper to experience God's assurance. Reggie Kidd in his book *With One Voice; Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* described the effect of music and singing in this way "I said earlier that we sing because song is a gift that connects us to God – when we sing our theology, we own it more personally. But it's not enough to say that our singing connects us to God – somehow, it connects *him* to *us* too."<sup>24</sup>

We use one scripture reading. The sermon is delivered from the main floor with a peripatetic style, not from the elevated pulpit in the chancel. No clergy vestments are worn. Following the sermon there is a musical piece, normally instrumental, to encourage the worshipper to reflect on how God's story has been shared and revealed.

By preaching from the same level as the congregation is seated, and by walking close to the pews (and even journeying down the center aisle toward those seated near the back), and then allowing a time of introspection following the sermon, we hope that the sermon element of the service becomes less a lecture moment, and becomes more a moment for direct engagement with God's Word. In contrast, during the traditional service the sermon is delivered from the elevated chancel behind the pulpit. Unavoidably, a sermon delivered from an elevated pulpit invites a feeling of a lecture (a dispassionate absorption of knowledge). In contrast, a

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<sup>24</sup> Reggie M. Kidd, *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 21.

sermon delivered on the same level as people are seated with the preacher moving around, and much closer to them, invites an atmosphere of conversational interaction; that is, a direct personal connection and experience, rather than a sermon delivered from a raised position and detached from the congregation.

The offering is introduced in the context that God's Word invites us to respond with our entire lives. In response to something which has happened in worship to that point in the service, people are encouraged to write something they feel called to offer to God in the coming week on a small piece of blank paper they received in the "announcement folder" as they arrived. This is a direct invitation for worshippers to tangibly join their life narrative with God's narrative. Worshippers are invited to bring their financial offerings, and their personal offerings written on the card, forward and place them in baskets at the front of the sanctuary. After the service, the written paper offerings are separated from the money and set aside. The next morning, I hold them as I pray for God to receive the offerings. No one reads what is written. The offerings are between the worshipper and God alone.

On first Sundays of the month, the Lord's Supper is celebrated. We do an expanded invitation to the table offering an explanation of what the sacrament means and why it is important for those who believe. We use an informal version of the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving. Worshippers are invited to come forward to receive the elements via intinction, as they feel called to respond – no ushers or

welcome team members instruct them. In this way, people actively respond and participate in the invitation to the Lord's table, rather than simply follow the instruction of an usher telling them when it is time to come forward.

When the Lord's Supper is not celebrated, a time of intercessory prayer follows the offering. Worshippers are invited to offer their prayer concerns, and they are included in the intercessory prayer time.

A closing song is sung. A charge is explicitly offered summarizing how the text can shape and form our lives in the coming week. The Pauline Apostolic benediction concludes the service.

While distinct in instrumentation, variety of songs, and leadership stance, from our 11:00 service, in essential form our First Worship service follows the same order of the Service for the Lord's Day as recommended in the Presbyterian Church (USA) Book of Common Worship.<sup>25</sup> Where First Worship differs from our traditional Service for the Lord's Day worship is in presentation and assumptions. It is not assumed that people gathered for worship already know God's story. So, we seek to offer an explicit theological narrative context for each of the movements of the four-fold ordo, speaking to why we have gathered, why we confess, why we read Scripture, why we respond to God with offerings from our lives. It is in this effort to explicitly present why each movement of worship is a response to God's Word that

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<sup>25</sup> Presbyterian Church (USA), *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 33.

we have a sharp contrast from the 11:00 worship service. At 11:00, it is assumed that people already know why each movement of the service is included. In First Worship, each movement of worship is narratively connected to God's revealed narrative.

In basic structure, both of our services closely adhere to the order of The Service for the Lord's Day within the Presbyterian Church (USA) Book of Common Worship. From an ecumenical perspective, this Presbyterian Church (USA) service guideline matches in form the four-fold order Clayton J. Schmit has identified as biblical in authority, and is almost universally present in Christian worship traditions in North America.<sup>26</sup>

The Bible gives repeated witness that worship is our primary human response to God's revelation in our lives. The act of worship is our response to God's prior revelatory action awakening in us an awareness of who God is and who we are in relation to him. In Genesis 12:7 for example, at the start of the Bible's account of Abram it reads, *"Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land. So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him.'"* In response to God's activity Abram built a spot to worship. In the New Testament the Apostle Paul in Romans 12:1 wrote these words, *"I appeal to you therefore brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy*

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<sup>26</sup> Schmit, *Sent and Gathered*, 25.

*and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*” In response to Jesus and the Gospel, Paul urged the Romans to see their entire lives as an offering to God in worship. Throughout the Bible it is revealed that worship is our human response to God’s activity in our personal lives and in the world around us. God acts and we respond in worship.

How we respond to God with our specific expression of worship is a question each local congregation must answer. The Bible reveals it is God who has drawn us to worship him, but how? What will our worship look like? What will our worship sound like? What will be the content of our response to God’s initiative? How can our worship serve to transform our individual narrative into God’s narrative?

In the search for biblically anchored transformational worship, we need to look to the Bible for guidance on such questions. Following the evolution of biblical accounts of worship, it is clear that our worship of God is constantly evolving and never static. It is always in a state of transformation in light of the historical and cultural realities in which we live and respond to God. For example, within Judaism worship slowly transformed from open air tabernacles, to tents, to a temple, and eventually to a synagogue centered worship life; all in response to changing historical and cultural realities.

In similar fashion, within Christianity worship in response to God’s revelation in Jesus Christ slowly evolved and transformed, from synagogues, to house churches,

to catacombs, and to cathedrals. Worship was transformed as distinctive Christian worship practices grew out of existing synagogue worship practices such as prayers, singing, scripture reading, and commentary, to include worship practices unique to Christianity such as the Lord's Supper and Christian Baptism.

So, from the biblical witness we see that the form and particular expression of worship in response to God's continuing activity in the creation is a dynamic evolving activity. God's story is always God's story, but the circumstances and conditions in which we receive it change as human life is dynamic and never static. Accordingly, a biblically anchored worship seeking transformation in accord with God's narrative is never static in form, but always in a state of dynamic transformation as God is revealed and received anew and afresh in time and space.

Because worship is a dynamic act which always takes place in a specific time and place, the question of how a biblically anchored worship is materially expressed can vary in style and comportment across cultures and generations. Even so, biblically anchored worship, regardless of what it sounds like or looks like will be focused on God's story, and not primarily on our human story. Webber (1984) wrote "In summary, here is what biblical worship does: It remembers God's work in the past, anticipates God's rule over all creation, and actualizes both past and future in the present to transform persons, communities, and the world."<sup>27</sup> His point is that true

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<sup>27</sup> Webber, *Ancient Future Worship*, 42.

biblical worship is always about enacting God's story, as revealed in the Bible.

Regardless of what our worship sounds like, or what it looks like, the content of biblical worship is always focused on God, and his story revealed for us. When this happens, the goal is to make the narrative character of God's revelation transparent.

As already noted, herein lies the challenge for congregations in our contemporary cultural context in the United States: How will we plan and conduct worship anchored in God's biblical narrative when many people don't know God's story? God's story is not their story. The fading of our Christendom cultural context means churches today cannot assume that people, even some who regularly attend worship, already know God's story. Yet, too often in congregations, the activity of worship is approached with the assumption that people (inside and outside) the congregations already know the story. Consequently, what worship in these congregations sounds like and looks like fails to connect with a large number of people. They don't know the story. They don't know God's narrative for human life. There is a lack of connection between worship and life.

So, for congregations to engage in biblically anchored transformative worship, they are called to first make the task of telling God's narrative a primary task. Only as our worship is anchored in and reflects who God is and what God desires as revealed in the Bible can we hope to seek transformation in accord with God's will, and to guard against transformation in accord with a non-biblical

narrative (e.g. Epicurean/Enlightenment worldview).

Throughout its 80-year history, our congregation has operated as basically a Christendom congregation in outlook and normative behavior. In planning and implementing its worship, this congregation has essentially assumed that people attending worship are already professing Christians who have previously learned and adopted God's story as their story. In recent decades, the congregation has expanded on its Christendom identity by employing a variety of "Attractional" methodologies such as excellent facilities with ample off-street parking, clean and bright child-care areas, an excellent music program, well planned and highly organized worship services, children and youth programs designed to entertain and share Christian values in age-appropriate ways. These "Attractional" methodologies are deeply integrated into our congregational life and corporate self-identity. These "Attractional" efforts assume that people who may come to church already know and have accepted God's story as their story.

Since we have historically offered worship that presumed pre-existing knowledge and acceptance of God's story on the part of someone coming to worship, explicitly pointing that story out in worship has not been a priority. The perspective is somewhat analogous to why the congregation's custom is not to announce hymns before singing them; the assumption is people can read. Likewise, the assumption is people already know and accept God's story.

This congregation has operated with the idea that worship is the time and place for those already in the family of God to gather. Accordingly, it has seen itself as responsible for offering the sacraments to those already in communion; to offer a place to come and be a Christian. Outside of its worship services, the congregation has focused on offering programs and activities for various ages and stages of life. In most instances, these programs and activities assume they are for those who already know God's story and are seeking nuance and refinement in their understanding of who they are and the meaning of their lives – not transformation from one way of living to another.

During my twelve years as pastor, the congregation has grown numerically. Yet less than 2% of these new members have been professions of faith accompanied by Baptism. The congregation added an Associate Pastor position for youth and their families. However, that position is now a non-ordained Director of Christian Education with responsibility for ministry with youth. In 2009, the congregation completed a \$3.6 million-dollar building expansion, and while it is a challenge, is faithfully servicing an initial \$2.3 million-dollar mortgage.

By these external measurements, the congregation appears relatively healthy. Yet, while these positives indicate that the congregation is succeeding in attracting those who already profess faith in God and Jesus Christ, what it also reveals is that we are not succeeding in functioning as a congregation that welcomes

and incorporates people unfamiliar with God's story as revealed in the Bible.

Moreover, these measurements offer no insight into whether or not existing members are experiencing personal transformation through their participation in the worship and congregational life of the church.

It is clear that this congregation has functioned well within its assumed Christendom context. However, indications are that the Christendom context around us is eroding. Consequently, there are fewer people to attract for whom this approach to worship effectively reaches. Nonetheless, the Bible tells us that God is continually active in the hearts and lives of those who are called to respond to him. Therefore, congregations such as ours need to re-discover how to be the church without presupposing a Christendom context wherein worshippers already know and live with a theological anthropology informed by God's narrative revealed in the Bible. We need to equip people to know how to discern what is God's story and what is the culture's story for human life. Seeking to become a congregation whose worship is anchored in the desire to tell God's narrative for those not yet familiar is one such way to do this.

In this project I will endeavor to learn whether intentionally planning and implementing worship which explicitly and overtly invites people into God's biblical narrative for their lives can reveal for them the dissonance which exists between the dominant cultural anthropology of the Epicurean/Enlightenment worldview in which

they have been acculturated, and a theological anthropology grounded in God's narrative. Stated in simple terms, can we invite a congregation through worship to adopt God's narrative for their lives?

## CHAPTER 2

### BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL SOURCES OF TRANSFORMATION

As I have considered biblical and theological sources for seeking to plan and implement biblically anchored worship several authors have been particularly influential in shaping my perspective on worship. Christopher Wright's book *The Mission of God's People*, Timothy Keller's book *Center Church*, Michael Horton's book *A Better Way*, Clayton J. Schmit's book *Sent and Gathered*, Robert Webber's book *Ancient Future Worship*, Alan Roxburgh's book *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*, and Alan Hirsch and Tim Catchim's book *The Permanent Revolution*. Respectively, these authors, and their books, offer a variety of distinct and particular theological and biblical perspectives regarding the biblical and theological grounds for emphasizing the task of making God's narrative the central task of our worship. Taken together, they have convinced me of the need to reclaim an intentionally biblically anchored worship.

The Bible makes it abundantly clear that God calls us to live differently from the culture around us. From the beginning of the Abraham saga in Genesis 12 to the post-resurrection creation of the church in the New Testament, we see example after example of God calling into existence individual believers and communities of faith to live differently than the world around them. It is the invitation to live and define human life in the framework of the theological anthropology of the Bible in

distinction from whatever cultural anthropology that may be dominant at any particular point in history.

Christopher Wright, in his book *The Mission of God's People*, offers much to consider as we think about the issue of transformation toward a theological anthropology for human life. Wright offers a thorough biblical theology to frame the mission of the church, including the corporate worship of the church. He argued for the church to ground the mission of the church in the task of joining God's mission. For Wright, it is not that the church has a mission. Rather it is that God has a mission for the whole of creation and we are called to join with that mission. A mission for the church that is uniquely defined by what God has revealed in scripture.

Wright acknowledged the lowly state of the church today in Western culture. His response is that we are called to anchor our understanding of human life and the corporate life of the church not in an equal conversation between scripture, church, and culture, but in the revealed unique witness of Scripture alone. So, then, in response to the numerous challenges of a biblical worldview posed by a postmodern world myopically consumed with the autonomous sovereignty of the individual, Wright urges greater engagement with Scripture - not less.

Connecting God's mission across the Old Testament and the New Testament, Wright posited that God first revealed his mission in his encounter with Abram in Genesis. In Genesis chapter twelve, God told Abram that through him "all the

peoples on earth will be blessed.” Accordingly, God’s mission to bless the world does not start with Jesus and the gospel, rather God’s mission has been to bless the whole world from the very beginning. When Abram became aware of God in Haran, he did not already know God’s story, rather he experienced the transcendent reality of God and responded to that reality by conforming his life to the call of God; he left Haran! Abram began to see his life’s narrative in the context of God’s narrative to bless all the peoples of the earth.

Wright offers a thorough biblical theology to frame the mission of the church. He argues for the church to ground the mission of the church as the task of joining God’s mission, “All our mission flows from the prior mission of God.”<sup>1</sup> Mission for the church is defined by what God has revealed in scripture. Aside from God’s mission, the church has no mission.

For Wright, in sharp distinction from scholars such as the aforementioned Brian McLaren, we are called to anchor our understanding of human life and the corporate life of the church not in an equal conversation between Scripture, church, and culture, but in the revealed unique witness of Scripture alone.<sup>2</sup> So, in response to the numerous challenges of a biblical worldview posed by a postmodern world myopically consumed with the sovereignty of the individual making choices, Wright

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 24.

<sup>2</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 31.

urged greater engagement with scripture - not less. Unlike McLaren and others, Wright is not willing to concede that the contemporary dynamic activity of the Holy Spirit in any way corrects or informs what God has already revealed in Scripture.

Another very helpful emphasis in Wright's book is his exegetical effort to demonstrate how Scripture does not start with Genesis 3, and the Fall of Man, and end with Revelation 20. Rather, Scripture opens with creation in Genesis 1 and concludes with its redemption in Revelation 21.<sup>3</sup> His point being that God's concern with creation is larger than merely the redemption of humanity. We human beings are a part of God's mission, but we are not the only divine concern. In contrast, our post-Enlightenment culture sees the individual as the very center of the universe, the rest of creation around us is simply there for us to use. Scripture helps us to see that humanity is a part of a much larger narrative. Without question, humanity is an important component of God's activity, but there is a larger story within which humanity is a part.

Biblically anchored worship which seeks to tell, and retell again and again, that human beings are creatures created by a sovereign God is a powerful counterpoint to the dominant Epicurean/Enlightenment cultural anthropology of our time. Such worship conducted explicitly and transparently within a comprehensive understanding of creation fundamentally decenters the Epicurean/Enlightenment

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<sup>3</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 48.

anthropological focus on the sovereignty of the individual. With such an understanding in place congregations can move beyond a merely individualistic emphasis on redemption, to a well-defined communal understanding of God at work in the world. This exegesis of the biblical narrative is indeed a powerful corrective to our current postmodern (Enlightenment) preoccupation with the sovereignty of individuals. Such an understanding of the biblical narrative is profoundly communal, connecting humanity with the creation around it. By seeking to be obedient to God's revealed will in the Bible, humanity lives in faithful community with God, with each other, and with the creation.

Wright's exegetical work speaks a powerful word on target as concerns grow in our time over the health and well-being of the earth. His work helps us frame pressing environmental questions of our day, such as the rapid depletion of natural resources, the rising pollution levels of the oceans, and an atmosphere which is becoming more toxic for human life and all of the creation. So, when viewed through the proper lens of the Bible, the created order (inclusive of humanity) is important in its own right as an activity of God, not simply as a resource for our human needs.

While much of the ecological conservation effort over the last few decades has been grounded in practical concerns, or even pagan mysticism, Wright shows that our justifiable concern for the health and sustainability of the environment (creation) is most accurately anchored in the biblical narrative of God's mission to

redeem all of creation. So, a theological concern over the environment is not simply a concern of how the decline of the natural world may affect humanity, but a concern of how human beings are responsible for the care of God's creation; of which we are a part. Wright's exegesis reframes environmental concerns within God's biblical narrative, and thereby provides a theological and communal understanding of why caring for the environment is important.

Genesis Chapter 1:26 states that human beings are given "dominion" over the creation God has created. Properly understood, this means not that we human beings are free to treat the creation as ours, but rather that we are entrusted with the task of exercising proper stewardship over what God has created. Framed in this way, we come to understand that human life exists in a larger context than just itself. Humanity lives in a framework, or community, of God's creation. This comprehensive and profoundly communal vision of human life existing as part of the God's larger creative acts, is a fundamentally different narrative than the cultural Epicurean/Enlightenment anthropology which dominates our time. It is to this vision of a profoundly communal and theological concern for the environment that Wright argued it is critical that we have more engagement with Scripture, not less.

In his identified task to create a biblical theology for life Wright provided an extensive biblical exegesis of the nature of human life, and he provided a powerful argument for anchoring human life firmly and uniquely in the Bible. Yet, what he

does not do is devote much attention to how we in the church are actively called to engage in the culture in which we live. Stated differently, his purpose is to support and inform already professing Christians with helpful and instructive biblical understandings for how to live. His work serves as a valuable foundation for how congregations can live out a biblical theology as they worship. Wright's exegetical approach redefines a concern over the environment from a purely secular one to a theological concern for God's creation, thereby fundamentally reframing environmental anxieties as a concern for the well-being of individuals to a human communal stewardship issue overseeing God's creation.

Offering a more expansive interpretation of how congregations can live in the biblical narrative than Wright, Timothy Keller, in his book *Center Church*, is devoted to transforming the church by speaking the gospel to a skeptical and unbelieving world. Certainly, Keller would not take issue with Wright's commitment to the exclusive and authoritative revelation of God's will as presented in the Bible. However, Keller's purpose in his book is to both accomplish the edification of professing Christians, AND to persuasively present the gospel to those who have not professed their faith and commitment in Jesus Christ.

Keller uses this definition for his biblically anchored theological vision, "So what is a theological vision? It is a faithful restatement of the gospel with rich implications for life, ministry, and mission in a type of culture at a moment in

history.”<sup>4</sup> His point is that the biblical narrative of God’s revelation is always lived out in history in particular circumstances. In this sense, divine revelation does not happen in a vacuum. The revelation God offers through the Bible is transcendent, but never timeless. It is always received by the church within historical circumstances. So, then, the gospel is always contemporary in every age.

By gospel, Keller means something quite specific. It is a message about God’s actions. It is not our human religious expression. He wrote, “The gospel is a message about how we have been rescued from peril.”<sup>5</sup> Following his exegesis of the biblical narrative Keller argued throughout his book that the “gospel” is something done for us by God’s actions revealed in Jesus Christ. It is a message we receive and accept. It is not something we do. It is done for us in God’s grace. Yes, we must claim it. We must accept it. But it is not our action but God’s alone in Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup> Such an understanding of how humanity exists in relationship with God fundamentally challenges the Epicurean/Enlightenment worldview which makes human experience as the ultimate measure of everything.

Accordingly, the task of the church as it seeks transformation is to faithfully contextualize the eternal and unchanging gospel message for our particular moment in time. The context of worship is the most public way for the church to pursue this

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<sup>4</sup> Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 19.

<sup>5</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 29.

<sup>6</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 31

task. Worship, then, is the task of speaking the gospel message in a voice that transcends a “church”, or “insiders” voice. Even so, we cannot ignore the culture we live in. We cannot simply dismiss all of the insights and advancements of humanity across our history. However, the unique revelation of God in Scripture claims a privileged position as we seek to frame and interpret human life and how we live it.

For Keller, the task of contextualization is the negotiation between these two realities: The unchanging gospel and the ever-changing cultural context in which it is proclaimed. In every particular context, it is the task of a worshipping community, and individual disciples within it, to discern what is of God, and what is not –while remaining fully engaged in the world we live in. Part of how we can engage the culture around us through our worship is to name the distinctions between the cultural anthropology we are acculturated in and the biblically revealed theological anthropology God calls us to adopt. This task is what Keller is after in *Center Church*. This is also the task of worship that is biblically anchored in God’s story. Such worship will seek to make clear the differences between a human life lived in the framework of an Epicurean/Enlightenment anthropology, and a human life lived within a biblically anchored theological anthropology.

John Stott in his book, *Between Two Worlds*, offered the image of a two-way bridge connecting Scripture and culture in order to preach and teach Scripture.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids, MI: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing. 1982), 138.

Within evangelical circles this has been a popular metaphorical image. Such a conceptual bridge allows for Scripture to be in contact and dialogue with whatever culture it is proclaimed in. In this bridge imagery, scriptural truths flow one way, and indigenous terms and circumstances flow back in exchange. It is along this pathway that Scripture (gospel) is proclaimed. However, the architectonic flaw in this conceptualization is that both ends of the bridge are on the same level. However, if we want to maintain the final authority of Scripture to inform culture; we cannot consider this two-way bridge as a level image. To remain anchored in Scripture it cannot be a level “hermeneutical circle”, or bridge. Such a level path places culture and Scripture as being equally informative for life.<sup>8</sup> Such an understanding does not preserve the privileged position of authority for Scripture, nor does it account for our fallen humanity.

Keller subscribes to a different concept than Stott. He calls it the “hermeneutical spiral”; wherein the final authority for human life is reserved for the Bible. Cultural insights and customs are allowed and helpful whenever they offer insight into Scripture, but do not change it.<sup>9</sup> In such an approach the church allows that there cannot be a “culturally free expression of Scripture” while insisting that there are universal and absolute truths expressed in the Bible. Keller calls this “balanced contextualization”. It avoids a cultural fundamentalism that is a complete

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<sup>8</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 105.

<sup>9</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 105.

rejection of culture yet remains anchored in the final authority of the Bible as the framework for human life. For example, when considering how worship is carried out (e.g. organ music versus a guitar and drums), this understanding frees the worship planner to make use of whatever instruments and tunes that effectively resonate with the intended congregation.

One example of how important Keller's distinction between a level bridge and a vertical hermeneutical spiral can be seen is in the realm of personal relationships, specifically sexual ethics. Within our dominant current cultural anthropology, sexual activity is deemed proper and appropriate so long as both parties consent and desire it, regardless of whether it is heterosexual or homosexual in nature. In contrast, the biblical witness clearly condemns homosexual sexual expression (Romans 1:26). Along a two-way bridge, it can be argued from personal experience that indeed sexual relationships between same gender individuals can be experienced as nurturing and loving. So, while Scripture reveals such relationships are against God's will and narrative for human life, the input from personal experience can point to examples of same gender sexual expression which do result in qualitatively similar outcomes as heterosexual experiences. So, the argument goes that same-gender sexual relationships are not contrary to God's will for human beings to experience love and nurture from one another. A level two-way bridge allows for this argument, against the biblical narrative revealing God's will.

The justification holds so long as we consider our human experience as equally authoritative with God's revealed narrative for human life. However, when we employ Keller's hermeneutical vertical spiral elevating God's revealed will for how we are to express our sexuality, our human experiences remain secondary to the priority of obeying God's revealed will for how we are to express our sexuality. So, then, it is not a question of whether same gender sexual relationships can be loving and nurturing, it is a question of what does Scripture reveal for us regarding how we are to express our sexuality? Scripture is authoritative, not our experiences.

Keller's "hermeneutical spiral" imagery applied specifically to the task of worship and preaching also has numerous implications. One of which is explored by Michael Horton, in his book *A Better Way*. In this work, Horton argued for an understanding of worship that is anchored in the biblical witness AND offers a creative conceptual framework to view worship in our present cultural circumstances. Using imagery drawn from the entertainment world of the culture at-large, Horton argued that each person lives according to a "script". That is to say a narrative scheme in how we see and understand our place in the creation.<sup>10</sup> The culture in which we live works to script us in accord with the normative and usual values and forms that are dominate in the culture. This is a cultural anthropology formed outside of the biblical witness.

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Scott Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of God-centered Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 52.

However, when we anchor our worship in God's revelation in the Bible it will offer a "counter script" that is incongruous with the dominant script of the cultural anthropology around us. Over time, part of what happens in the act of biblically anchored worship is a re-scripting of our identities. That is, transformation in accord with the biblical narrative for human life. Horton writes the following in describing the act of biblically anchored worship,

Rather it is as God the Spirit works on us through the proclamation of the Word that we are re-scripted: our lives, purpose, identities, and hopes conformed to that 'new world' into which the Word and Spirit give us new birth – not the other way around. Instead of our remaking God and his Word in terms of our experience and reason, we end up being remade – caught in the action of the divine drama.<sup>11</sup>

His point is that biblically anchored worship has the ability to reshape us in the image God intends for us. Worship intentionally designed to make explicit that human beings are created by God to live in obedience to God's will, not as co-creators alongside God, invites people to rescript their lives in accord with God's narrative.

Horton recognizes that individuals in our postmodern culture are scripted to see themselves not as creatures before a transcendent sovereign God (who demands our obedience), but rather as sovereign individuals simply exercising our personal preferences in the various areas of our lives. This is the cultural anthropological context in which we worship today. Horton points to what psychologist Robert Jay Lifton refers to as the "protean style". The mythological

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<sup>11</sup> Horton, *A Better Way*, 52.

deity Proteus was said to be able to morph and transform at will, assuming whatever “mask” necessary in the moment, unless he was chained and restrained. So, in our culture today, we are taught to see ourselves as capable of donning whatever protean “mask” we find convenient at the moment.<sup>12</sup> This cultural anthropology does not conceive of human life as individually accountable to anything outside of itself – we can change and morph based on the contingent forces of the moment without referent to a transcendent reality. Biblically anchored worship attacks this image and deconstructs it, by asserting a theological anthropology in which God is sovereign.

For example, in Horton’s argument the task of preaching in biblically anchored worship is to rein in the protean style prevalent in our thinking and re-script us to see ourselves as accountable. He wrote, “Our purpose in preaching is to chain Proteus and to prophesy his death and resurrection in Christ. Our reference point is no longer endless choice but Jesus Christ to whose image we are being conformed.”<sup>13</sup>

Accordingly, the task of preaching in worship in our present culture is not primarily to inform or exhort, nor is it primarily to offer the finer points of knowledge regarding God’s revelation in the Bible (Christendom tasks), it is rather to invite us to give up our own narrative of who we are and what we are, and join in the grand

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<sup>12</sup> Horton, *A Better Way*, 47.

<sup>13</sup> Horton, *A Better Way*, 57.

narrative drama of who God is and what He is doing in His will.

So, then, this type of preaching is an invitation to exchange our culturally transmitted script for God's script. It is the invitation to "put on Christ" and take off the mask of individual sovereignty. In a culture that does not already know God's story and does not presume a transcendent reality to which we are accountable, this approach to preaching offers a counter script to the culture in which we live. It is a different story. It's not a refinement of the story we already know from the culture. It's not a tweaking of a worldview, but the deconstructing of one worldview and the offering of an alternative one; a biblical worldview. Horton elaborates even more,

The goal is to rescript our hearers, to give them another plot that draws together all their own personal histories as well as the world's into a meaningful whole that transforms even the parts. Our goal is not to accommodate the Christian plot to the shallow and destructive plots of the contemporary context but to accommodate ourselves and our hearers to the real drama of history.<sup>14</sup>

Using the grand scope of God's revelation in both the Old and new Testaments as our anchor, worship inclusive of such preaching can enable us to rescript our lives as a part of God's narrative, thereby replacing the current cultural narrative of individual sovereignty. Horton argued that in preaching God's narrative the Bible assures us that the gospel will be heard. Horton wrote,

It is important for us to realize that preaching is effective not because of the minister or the people, the music, the staging and lighting, the dramas, or other means that we might consider more effective than "the foolishness of preaching." It is effective because God has promised to

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<sup>14</sup> Horton, *A Better Way*, 57.

dispense his saving grace then and there by his Spirit, and it grows organically out of the logic of the message itself because it is an announcement of something that has been accomplished by God, rather than an incentive to get sinners to save themselves by sheer force of will or effort. It is good news, not good advice, good production value, or good ideas.<sup>15</sup>

So, it is in biblically anchored worship that God's narrative can rescript us, regardless of the specific style or form of worship expression.

Horton goes on to cite several biblical passages which point to the absolute sovereign power of God to transform us by his Word. 2 Corinthians 4:7 reads, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not us." The power to transform us in worship comes from beyond us, it is the power of God's narrative itself. Horton again cites the Apostle Paul from Romans 10:8 that it is the power of the Spirit at work creating in us faith as we hear the gospel preached.<sup>16</sup>

Clayton J. Schmit in his book *Sent and Gathered: A Worship Manual for the Missional Church*, explores how God's narrative expressed through a four-fold ordo can be the main focus in our worship today given that so many in our culture no longer know the story. Schmidt argues that many of the "traditional" forms of worship, the church has inherited from previous centuries were created inside a Christendom cultural context. At present, to a significant degree that cultural context

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<sup>15</sup> Horton, *A Better Way*, 64.

<sup>16</sup> Horton, *A Better Way*, 65.

has evaporated. This situation calls for a radical rethinking of how biblically anchored worship needs to be shaped and formed as it takes place in the present dominant cultural anthropology. Describing the changed cultural context for the church today he wrote.

But mission today is not merely something that local churches support in foreign territories. Mission today recognizes that Western society, once firmly understood as Christendom, is now more like the early church in its pluralism and in its state of needing to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup>

His point is that worship in a mission field cannot look or feel the same as worship inside Christendom.

Schmit wants to highlight the basic pattern of biblically anchored worship and argued that local innovations and expressions which follow that pattern can be varied and diverse – toward the overall goal of being missional.<sup>18</sup> The biblically anchored four-fold pattern, or *ordo*, tells the overall story of God's activity in the world through its very flow and structure. The worship pattern he advocated is Gathering, Word, Sacrament, and Sending. In the traditional Service for the Lord's Day, each of these four elements are present. People are gathered by God's activity/call. The Word is read and proclaimed. The sacraments are performed. The people are sent out into the world.

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<sup>17</sup> Clayton J. Schmit, *Sent and Gathered: A Worship Manual for the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 38.

<sup>18</sup> Schmit, *Sent and Gathered*, 73.

Comparing numerous liturgical traditions and denominational expressions of this pattern there are numerous elaborations and refinements of this pattern.

Schmit delves into each of these movements to explore their biblical grounding and origination. He does not advocate that this four-fold pattern must be observed in all places and at all times.<sup>19</sup> Yet in this biblically historic and broadly ecumenical organizational structure he does find a structure and rhythm for Christian worship that is biblically anchored and instructive when seeking to tell God's story in a culture that no longer knows that story.

It is effective, at least in part, because embedded in the very structure of this four-fold ordo is a counter narrative to the dominant cultural anthropology surrounding a congregation today. The four-fold ordo asserts the sovereignty of God as it is God who has called us to worship. It proclaims God's narrative as the ultimate truth for human life. Through the celebration of the sacraments it claims the biblical promise of God present and active in the life of creation. As worship ends, worshippers are sent out into world to live in God's revealed narrative regarding the intent and purpose of human life.

This four-fold pattern of Gathering, Word, Sacrament, Sending, in connection with the worship of God can be found across the pages of the Bible. Schmit cites numerous scripture passages to support each of these liturgical components.<sup>20</sup> While

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<sup>19</sup> Schmit, *Sent and Gathered*, 68.

<sup>20</sup> Schmit, *Sent and Gathered*, 60-68.

different theological traditions express and interpret these elements of the ordo in diverse ways, regardless of how they may be expressed in the particular worship traditions, they inherently deconstruct and undermine the Epicurean/Enlightenment worldview that enshrines human experience and reason as centrally important. Why? Because the entire focus is on God, not humanity! Biblically anchored worship inclusive of the four-fold ordo regardless of what it sounds like or looks like is inherently focused on telling and enacting God's story, not our human one.

### **Changing the Question**

Alan Roxburgh in his book, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*, argued that churches within Christendom have for centuries used Matthew 28:18-20 as the primary guiding scripture for defining the mission of the church. In these verses, the resurrected Jesus offers to his disciples (and the church has claimed their mission as its mission) clear objectives. Go and make disciples of the nations. Go out and baptize. Go out and teach what Jesus has revealed. As the primary mission text of churches within Christendom, Roxburgh argued that the worldview of the church operating beneath this text has been something akin to this attitude; we (congregations) have what the world needs to know about God, now you should learn it. Such a position assumes a position of power and authority for a congregation as it speaks the gospel to culture. It claims a privileged position of authority for the congregation in the world. This position is likely received negatively

by individuals that have been acculturated to see themselves as radically sovereign. Consequently, Roxburgh argued for a different approach in order to discover how God is at work in the lives of those who are called.

Given that our culture no longer recognizes the authority of the Bible, nor its biblical narrative of God's story, as a legitimate authority to define human life; what can be done to open people to grasping that it is God at work in their lives? The biblical narrative is simply ignored in contemporary culture, and the church struggles to find a language and message that will penetrate the dominant culture. The net result is that the Bible is ignored, people do not seek a relationship with Jesus Christ, and people do not come to church. People do not live their lives in light of the biblical narrative. Roxburgh's point is not so much that within the confines of the church's worship and practices Matthew 28:18-20 is unhelpful. Rather, his point is that we need a new proof text for defining the mission of the church now that the biblical story is not well known and accepted in our culture. He wrote, "Now we are in a place where ecclesiology isn't the issue. Missiology is."<sup>21</sup> The implications of this cultural moment for the worship life of churches are significant. Essentially, can the church shape its worship in ways that are descriptive of the mission of God, and lessen our historically prescriptive approach to planning and implementing worship? Roxburgh offers some clues.

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<sup>21</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 27.

Given that the cultural context in which the church worships does not acknowledge, or accept, the theological anthropology of God's revealed narrative, worship must make the message of that theological anthropology its first concern. Can worship be less about imposing a preconceived message, and more about "describing" how we witness God at work in the world? Exposing the dissonance between Epicurean/Enlightenment cultural anthropology and a biblically anchored theological anthropology is key.

Roxburgh proposed Luke 10:1-12 as a more appropriate proof text for defining the mission of the church in the absence of Christendom. This passage cites Jesus' instructions to the seventy disciples to go out into the world; a world that does not yet know the theological anthropology of the biblical narrative. The disciples are sent out to places where people actually live and work. In this text Jesus instructs his followers to take nothing with them. They are to leave their security and comforts behind and go into the world to see what God is doing. Specifically, Luke 10:2 reads, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into his harvest." The seventy are sent out into the world. The task of the 70 is to encourage people to reframe their live experiences in light of the revelation of God's will in the gospel.

What Roxburgh is fundamentally calling for is to profoundly engage the culture around congregations in a new way. How congregations plan and implement

worship cannot be excluded from this task. Worship planned and implemented from a Matthew 28:18-20 perspective assumes that God's narrative has already been received and embraced. Such worship fundamentally seeks to refine a faith that is already defined. In contrast, worship planned and implemented from a Luke 10:1-12 perspective does not assume that someone in worship has already embraced God's story. It is worship that invites us to see the narrative of our lives within the transcendent revealed narrative of God's story.

The advantage of such a paradigm shift in planning and implementing worship is found in the effort made to explicitly connect the experiences people have in their lives with elements of God's narrative for human life revealed in Scripture. It is a paradigm shift not dissimilar from the biblical mission of the 70.

Worship from this starting point of Luke 10:1-12 recognizes that the worldview of someone attending worship may, or may not be, in accord with the theological anthropology of the biblical narrative. It is worship that assumes the primary task of telling the story itself, and is devoted to telling it (Webber- "enacting it") in terms that someone who does not already know it can understand the distinctions of a biblical worldview from a worldview formed by extra-biblical sources.

Such worship is profoundly aware that not all recognize the authority God's revelation in the Bible. It is worship open to how God may be at work in the lives of

people who do not yet know that the God of the Bible has claimed them. He wrote, “Implicit in this method is a real and humble recognition that we cannot claim some apriori privileged position in which we already “know” what the gospel is as we enter into dialogue with culture and church.”<sup>22</sup> Worship which places God’s narrative as primary invites those participating to begin to see themselves in God’s story; it offers the starting pointing for someone to re-define their understanding of who they are in relation to the revealed God of the bible.

Roxburgh believes the church is called to venture out into the neighborhood to discern what God is doing. We need to stop asking what he calls “church questions”, and ask instead, “What is God up to?” When the neighborhood comes to worship a similar perspective is helpful. In such an open encounter with culture Roxburgh calls for an end to what he calls a church monologue. It is a call to reengage in a genuine three-way conversation with Scripture, church, and culture.<sup>23</sup> His argument is powerful and persuasive at numerous points, but it falls short of fully embracing the God’s biblical narrative as the ultimate authority for human life.

He falls short by granting too much to the culture. He follows Stott’s image of a level bridge, rather than Keller’s vertical hermeneutical spiral wherein God’s Word holds a privileged position. Indeed, he has more confidence in our ability to discern what is of the Holy Spirit and what is of the fallen world than Scripture and the

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<sup>22</sup> Roxburgh, *Missional*, 52.

<sup>23</sup> Roxburgh, *Missional*, 48.

revealed presence of original sin in human life allow. Hence, his prescription fails to account for the scriptural revelation that humanity's fallen character always shrouds our pursuit of transformation. Biblically anchored worship can be, in fact, needs to be, open to the cultural circumstances in which it takes place, but the content of worship must remain exclusively God's revealed narrative. So, we do need to change how we ask the questions, but in every case the answer must come from Scripture, not human experience.

### **Reclaiming the Office of Apostle in Worship**

With Roxburgh's advice for the church to be open to how God may be at work in the lives of those who have not yet embraced the biblical narrative, the question becomes then how do we plan and implement worship which clearly and unambiguously claims what is of God, and what is not, in our worship? There is a way: To reclaim the biblically revealed office of Apostleship in worship.

Toward that goal authors Alan Hirsch and Tim Catchim wrote their book *The Permanent Revolution*. In this book, the author's foundational claim is that Western Christianity is in decline and suffering from a certain malaise which they attribute to the Church's neglect, and in some cases outright oppression, of the five-fold ministry given to the church by Christ as outlined in Ephesians 4:11. In that passage the Apostle Paul writes that Christ has gifted His church with a five-fold ministry wherein some are called to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some shepherds,

and some teachers (APEST). It is the thesis of these authors that over the centuries the Western church has emphasized and concentrated on only the last two gifts, shepherds and teachers. At the same time, the Church has either ignored or ostracized in its ministry the other three spiritual gifts; apostles, prophets, and evangelists. Therefore, the Church has not fully utilized and applied the full spiritual gifts Christ equipped the Church with in order to grow and carry the Gospel message to the world. The conclusion they reach is that the Church must recapture a vision of ministry that fully incorporates the five-fold ministry of spiritual gifts delineated in Ephesians 4:11 in order to grow and mature.

To their point, much of how we shape and form our worship in congregations has been guided more by individual therapeutic concerns (the office of “shepherd”), than by a concern to define what is a biblical faith and what is not. Worship has been planned with an eye toward an emphasis on nurturing and supporting human life in challenging circumstances such as grief or temptation, to the neglect of clearly presenting what is of God and what is not. The authors argue that in Ephesians 4:1-16 Paul does not mean that some believers are apostles and that some are prophets, or evangelists, or shepherds, or teachers, exclusively. Instead, they interpret Paul to mean that each believer carries all five gifts within himself/herself. By extension, this means each congregation also possesses these five gifts from Christ.

The authors spend considerable time discussing how each believer (and

congregation) does have a “base” gift, but is also called upon, depending on the context and circumstances, to enter one of the other “phases” in order to contribute to the overall missional ministry of the church. So, for those called to plan and lead worship in a congregation in our cultural moment, the task is to be intentional in explicitly claiming the office of being an Apostle. As they so understand the office, it is to boldly define what is of God and what is not.

Hirsch and Catchim argue that without a full appreciation and application of the five-fold ministry given by Christ for the work of a congregation in worship, it is not fully implementing the gifts of God given by Christ to congregations. Moreover, by ignoring the spiritual gifts of apostles, prophets, and evangelists, we in fact are misrepresenting the fullness of Christ’s vision for the life of the Church in the world. Speaking of the charisms of the five-fold ministry they wrote,

The charisms of APEST are given that the body of Christ might grow and mature, that we live out the unity described in verses 1-6, that we might achieve true understanding and not be capricious people given to theological illusions, and to find our organic wholeness in Christ and each other, that is to be the people Jesus intended us to be.<sup>24</sup>

The authors elaborate their understanding of each of these charisms as they seek to make their case that Christianity expanded across the western world because initially the church did embrace and value the five-fold ministry. It is their contention

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<sup>24</sup> Alan Hirsch, Tim Catchim, and Mike Breen, *The Permanent Revolution: Apostolic Imagination and Practice for the 21st Century Church* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 15.

that as a result of living out the five-fold gifts in practice, the Gospel was received by many and Christianity was vibrant and dynamic as can be readily seen in the expanding ministry of Paul, Peter, and many others recorded in the New Testament. In those early decades of the Church's worship and life the Gospel spread as a movement changing people's lives, and not as an institution concerned with property, buildings, and political/cultural power.

However, over time the Church's success in converting large numbers of people to the faith meant that the Church acquired worldly standing and influence in society. A consequence of this success was that the Church became less a movement and more of an institution. As an organization concerned with perpetuating itself and maintaining its position in society and culture the church elevated and highly valued the spiritual gifts of shepherding and teaching, to the neglect of the apostolic, prophetic, and evangelistic, gifts. Hirsch and Catchim argued that this phenomenon is completely understandable (albeit regrettable) given that within an institutional framework the need to care for people (the shepherd) and the need to teach the traditions and content of the faith in order to perpetuate the life of the institution itself become paramount, to the exclusion of the spiritual gifts that are more likely to unsettle and challenge existing thoughts and practices. The Bible gives ample evidence that Apostles are not always well received! Indeed, in the Book of Acts, the Apostle Paul encountered significant opposition as he proclaimed the gospel.

As the authors see our situation today, the Church has lost its Christ given essential character of being a movement. Therefore, it is incapable of challenging the status quo of our society and culture. They offer the imagery of a “permanent revolution” in order to understand how the Church is called to live into the vision Christ revealed. It is their argument that only as the church lives into full APEST ministry (truly valuing and respecting the five-fold vision of Ephesians 4:11) will it be free and vibrant enough to truly change people’s lives. Only as a movement, and not as an institution, will the church be able to hear God’s call to live as God intends us to live and not as the world imagines we should live. This is what they mean when they call for the Church to be “missional.”

While they devote significant space in the book to developing their particular understanding of what each spiritual gift looks like and how it serves the body of Christ, they devote an entire third of the book to their understanding of what the spiritual gift of being an apostle means to the life of the church. In their estimation, apostles are the key to invigorating and enlivening a missional understanding of the church. They believe that recovering a comprehensive understanding of Ephesians 4:11 is absolutely key to the future of Christianity in the Western world. They write, “Apostles then and now, have an irreplaceable purpose in maintaining ongoing missional capacities, generating new forms of ecclesia, and working for the continual

renewing of the church, among many other vital functions.”<sup>25</sup> They are careful to make clear that each of the charisms are important and indispensable to the life of the church. However, the core role of an apostle is to carry out (to be sent) the very DNA of the church to the world. It is at this point that the five-fold ministry coincides with the call to engage in biblically anchored worship. Within the five-fold vision of the Church, it is the calling of the apostle to lead the way, to push into new territory, AND to renew existing forms of the Church in line with Christ’s vision.

In short, the role of an Apostle is to expand the bounds of the Church and of faith into places where either it has not been, or (as is the case in most contexts within the western world) where the faith has declined or languished in our current Epicurean/Enlightenment cultural moment. When anchored in God’s story as revealed in the Bible, Apostles carry with them the very “genetic code” of the faith. It is that foundation upon which everything else in the church’s ministry subsequently arises and is built on. Apostolic worship leadership is the task of making explicit how God’s narrative of a theological anthropology for human life, as revealed in the Bible, is distinct from the dominant cultural anthropology around us today.

Through the coordinated content of corporate prayers, through the careful explication of biblical texts in preaching, and through the deliberate selection of song lyrics used in worship, apostolic worship leadership can move beyond the often-

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<sup>25</sup> Hirsch & Catchim, *The Permanent Revolution*, 99.

expected tasks of worship and preaching in a Christendom context: The refinement of biblical knowledge and therapeutic amelioration of life's ills. The apostolic office as described by the authors in the context of worship is focused on consistently naming that which is of God, and that which is not.

Interestingly, and informative in the search for apostolic worship leadership in congregations, Hirsch and Catchim distinguish between two types of apostolic leadership in the New Testament. First, there is the model of the Apostle Paul. It is clear from the New Testament letters attributed to him, and from the material in the Book of Acts, that Paul's calling was to carry the Gospel to the Gentile world. Paul was sent to those who did not know God as He had been revealed in the scriptures of the Old Testament. In doing so, Paul carried with him the essential "genetic codes" necessary to communicate Christianity to those unfamiliar with the activity of God revealed in the Old Testament AND to communicate the Gospel as it had been revealed in Jesus Christ. While there are those in our context who are not familiar with the Bible, the broad contours of Christianity remain familiar to many in our culture. So, the Pauline style of apostolic office identified by the authors, while still a necessity, may in fact be of less importance than the other type of apostolic office they identify: The Petrine style.

This second type of New Testament apostolic office characterized by the Apostle Peter was different in its focus from the apostolic tasks carried out by Paul. Peter's

calling, his mission, was to carry the “genetic codes” of the Gospel to those who already considered themselves God’s people – the Jews. Peter’s mission was to reframe and renew these people’s vision of God’s activity and God’s will as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Given that much of our culture retains at least the vestiges of a Christian context, it may in fact be that this Petrine image of the apostolic office can help in connecting the Gospel with these “lost children” of our culture who carry with them the self-identity of being a Christian, yet do not participate in the worship life of a congregation, nor do they allow the authority of God’s narrative to shape and form how they live. So, in search of a transformation path anchored in God’s story, biblically anchored and biblically explicit worship can intentionally seek to reframe and refocus what has been previously absorbed and inculcated from extra-biblical sources.

For example, our culture highly esteems the “right” of equality among people. The Epicurean/Enlightenment source for this value is the notion that all people have the right to be treated equally because of their individual sovereignty. In contrast, informed by God’s narrative, all people are equal, but not because of their individual sovereignty. Rather, all are equal because all are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26). With this shift of anchoring the authority for defining this cultural value of equality in God’s narrative, the value of equality is theologically

reframed. So, not unlike Peter urging his Jewish brothers and sisters to re-think the messianic Old Testament prophecies in light of the coming of Christ, biblically anchored worship can explicitly invite people to reframe what they have been taught by our dominant culture without reference to God's Word.

The authors offer numerous analogies and metaphors to show the differences in these two types of apostolic ministry. For example, Paul was a "pioneer", carrying the Gospel where it had never been. Peter was a "settler", charged with helping people of faith revise and renew a proper understanding of God's narrative with the advent of Jesus Christ. The authors write this about the two different types of apostles.

In modern equivalents of apostolic ministry in Western contexts, the Pauline is called to extend and establish Christianity onto new ground in the West, while the Petrine is called to help reframe the nature of Western Christianity itself. The one form is thus primarily pioneering and cross-cultural and the other innovative and intracultural.<sup>26</sup>

It is the contention of the authors that the Christian church today desperately needs to rediscover and actively recover the integral role of apostolic ministry. At the level of an individual congregation, the recovery of this office will also invigorate congregational worship. They wrote,

Given the massively changed conditions of this century, we can no longer rely on the formulas and algorithms inherited from our Christian storehouse. We must return to our deepest home, the movemental ecclesiology of the New Testament, and so rediscover the power of

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<sup>26</sup> Hirsch & Catchim, *The Permanent Revolution*, 121.

apostolic movement.<sup>27</sup>

Worship which explicitly and intentionally seeks to present the biblical narrative is worship that is “apostolic” in character: Defining and pointing to that which is of God’s narrative, and that which is not. Keeping these two types of apostle models in view, the authors outline how the church can fulfill its calling to the five-fold ministry framework and do so with both “missional” and “movement” characteristics.

Hirsch and Catchim’s book is thought provoking and addresses the urgent need of the church to engage in the process of biblically anchored transformation as it seeks to follow God’s will in the present and into the future. Their image of the early church as a “movement” rather than an “institution” is particularly helpful given our contemporary circumstances where we are experiencing declining membership, participation, and support in many congregations. While the temptation to gauge success “by the numbers” is quite real, the goal of transformation for the worship life of the church is not completely understood as increasing formal membership numbers, sustaining existing church campuses, or increasing the financial sustainability of particular congregations. The goal of transforming the church’s worship life is more comprehensively understood as a renewed and vibrant faith evident in the daily individual discipleship of those who worship.

Accordingly, they argue that transforming our understanding of the Church to

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<sup>27</sup> Hirsch & Catchim, *The Permanent Revolution*, 156

one of “movement” and not buildings or programmatic activity is helpful.

Transformation is about people professing their faith and trust in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and then effecting whatever changes in their lives necessary to bring their behavior into accord with Christ’s teachings. So, then, it is much more powerful to join a movement of people seeking and following God’s will in how they live life, than it is to “join” a church, as someone might “join” a country club or the local Rotary club. Biblically defined, discipleship is about following Christ, not church membership.

Yet, the most thought provoking and stimulating aspect of this book is their development of how critical apostolic ministry is to the task of seeking transformation within the worship life of the church. We live in a time when the influence of a cultural anthropology detached from the anchor of scripture and faith are dominant. Even those within congregations often allow such a worldview and its thoughts and ideas to shape and inform how they interpret and apply scripture in their lives and in the life of their congregation. The need for apostolic leadership in the planning and implementation of a biblically anchored worship to recover and reinvigorate the very “genetic code” of a biblical faith is great. Put simply, there is confusion over what is, and what is not Christianity?

These authors anchor their vision for a transformed Christian church, including its worship, in the scriptural model revealed in Ephesians 4:1-16, they show how our

real task is to offer a vibrant and dynamic vision of the Gospel that is authentically grounded in Christ's witness. When the Church chooses to fully embrace the gifts Christ has given it, it is then that we can expect biblically anchored transformation to unfold in the lives of those who worship.

### **Concluding Thoughts on Biblical and Theological Sources of Transformation**

Consequently, undergirding my project are the following theological convictions. Congregations need more engagement with the Bible and God's unique narrative for human life if they want transformation to occur in accord with God's revealed will. Wright's work makes clear that a more thoughtful engagement with Scripture is called for in our time of a fading Christendom. Many may know discrete facts from the Bible, but is there a comprehensive grasp of the entire narrative? This is what Wright is after, and it is what is called for when seeking to make God's story our story.

God is at work in his creation in dynamic and fluid fashion. The Bible gives us numerous examples of how God effects transformation in the creation beyond what humanity can immediately recognize as divine activity. However, the dynamic activity of human culture needs to always be understood in the framework of God's existing revelation: The Bible. So, Keller's emphasis that Scripture must remain our final authority for understanding our lives, even as our personal experiences and desires may often be contrary to what God desires. His term "balanced

contextualization” allows a congregation to utilize and employ cultural innovations and advancements, while always remaining firmly anchored in God’s revealed narrative.

Human beings have been created as narrative creatures. That is why God has revealed himself through a narrative: The Bible. Indeed, human beings find meaning and significance in our lives through the stories we tell ourselves. It is that facet of our humanity which Michael Horton pointed out as he described the scripts we use for our lives. So, Horton’s encouragement for us to attack through preaching the “Proteus” notion that we can script our lives based on our individual wants and desires is important as worship is planned in congregations. Particularly in regard to the task of preaching Horton’s work can inform how God’s narrative is proclaimed in worship. Accordingly, in preaching, let us seek to chain “Proteus”, and limit our script for life to that of Jesus Christ in order that our individual script may reflect Christ and not the world. Let us give up our script, and “put on” Christ’s script for life.

In a time when many when many do not truly know God’s narrative, the task of apostolic ministry is needed. Apostles carry with them the DNA of God’s revealed narrative. The task of planning and implementing overtly biblical worship in the pursuit of transformation according to God’s narrative needs a “Petrine apostolic” office in worship leadership naming that which is in accord with God’s revealed will and that which is contrary to it.

## CHAPTER 3

### WHY WE NEED BIBLICALLY ANCHORED WORSHIP

#### A Literature Review of Selected Works

The publication of literature devoted to the topic of how and why Christians worship is vast, varied, and constantly growing. In recent decades, part of why so much energy and attention has been devoted to questions around the topic of worship is undoubtedly connected to what has come to be known as “The Worship Wars.”<sup>1</sup> While this phrase is somewhat sensationalistic, it nonetheless does convey how passionate people of different outlooks have come to view the task of Christian worship. Most often, the “battleground” has been between those who wish to maintain what they see as “traditional” worship forms of expression, and those who wish to see a more “contemporary” form of worship expression.

Defining precisely what people mean when these terms “traditional” and “contemporary” are used to describe worship is quite difficult to discover. In my interactions with worshippers over the last two and a half decades of parish ministry I have discovered that the definitions of these terms are fluid, elastic, and quite specific to the individuals that claim them. However, we can attach some generalizations to these terms for the purpose of this project.

“Traditional” worship is most often characterized as featuring an organ and/or

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 2.

piano as the primary instrument used in worship. A choir of rehearsed voices assists the congregation in singing, as well as, offering anthems. A hymnal is used for congregational singing of two, or perhaps three hymns. Clergy and choir wear gowns/robes. Clergy preach from behind an elevated pulpit, and the sermon is expected to be approximately 10-15 minutes. A printed order of worship is used. Depending on denominational tradition, and specific historical practices of the congregation, the flow of worship is normally quite well established and often includes set elements such as an affirmation of faith, responsorial pieces of music, and call and responses at particular moments of the service (opening, confession, etc.). In my own tradition of the Presbyterian Church (USA) the outline of the Service for the Lord's Day found in the Presbyterian Church (USA) Book of Common Worship is a wonderful example of such "traditional" worship.<sup>2</sup> Of course, how this worship is manifest in particular congregations is unique and specific to particular congregational history, but generally speaking the worship is characterized as orderly and highly dependent on ritual forms.

In contrast, "contemporary" worship employs a wide variety of instrumentation (e.g. piano, electronic keyboard, guitar, numerous instruments of percussion, and more). There is no printed bulletin. Clergy do not wear gowns or robes. The sermon is delivered without a pulpit and in a less formal style, and may last longer than 15

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<sup>2</sup> Presbyterian Church (USA), *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

minutes. There is no choir, in its place is often a “praise team” featuring lead singers to help guide congregational singing. The songs are of recent composition, or are musically reformatted versions of traditional hymns. Worshippers are often invited to stand much more often than in a “traditional” service. No printed order of worship is handed out. The “dress code” expectation in such services is less formal. The service is livelier when compared with the “traditional” forms of worship.

These descriptions are certainly not exhaustive, but are intended to offer some generalizations for the purpose of this literature review. In any given congregation, as with “traditional services”, there will be additions and subtractions to these generalizations which are unique to the local setting. Moreover, my purpose in offering these is not to affirm or endorse either style or expression of worship. Rather, in reviewing the literature which follows, I have come to the conclusion that the church faces a challenge beyond these “battlegrounds” of “the worship wars”.

Given the dominant cultural anthropology of an Epicurean/Enlightenment worldview deeply embedded in individuals who arrive for worship, the task at hand for congregations is to plan and implement biblically anchored worship presenting God’s narrative for who we are as human beings. What is needed is an approach to worship that relentlessly seeks to present and proclaim God’s revealed narrative, in an effort to deconstruct the notion of autonomous human sovereignty, regardless of whether it is perceived as “traditional” or “contemporary” worship!

For the purposes of this project I have found the following authors and their books on the issue and importance of worship instructive. John Witvliet's book *Worship Seeking Understanding*, posits that worship needs to include the actual biblical content of God's revealed narrative. James K. A. Smith's book *Imagining the Kingdom*, encourages us to remember that in worship we must seek to speak to both emotion and intellect. Michael Horton's book, *A Better Way*, emphasizes how important it is in our culture of endless choice to invite worshippers to rescript their lives with the biblically revealed script of Jesus Christ and his total obedience to the will of God. Simon Chan's book *Liturgical Theology*, powerfully argues that the actual content of the liturgies we use, both examined and unexamined, shape and form our human identity. Arguing that the popular notion that evangelical worship is preferable to explicitly organized liturgical worship Melanie Ross in her book, *Evangelical Versus Liturgical*, argues persuasively that such thinking is a false dichotomy. Rodney Stark's book, *The Triumph of Christianity*, points to how distinctively Christian ways of living human life, which grew out of repeated experiences of God's narrative in worship, proved persuasive to many as the church lived and worshipped in a pagan cultural environment. Each of these works has helped to shape and direct this project in distinct ways.

A helpful place to begin in our search to discern a path of biblically anchored in the worship life of the church is Witvliet's book *Worship Seeking Transformation*.

Seeking guidance to meet the present challenges facing the worship life of the church today, he looks to the biblical witness of how our fundamental relationship with God is to be experienced and expressed in worship. Witvliet argued that there is a strong link between the spiritual health of a community and its worship life. He notes the example of the Former Prophets in the Old Testament. Whenever Israel was faithful in its covenant life with God spiritually, then its worship life was vibrant and strong. However, when Israel failed to be exclusively reliant upon God and looked to adopt the spiritual beliefs and practices of their Canaanite neighbors, their worship also suffered.<sup>3</sup>

Pointing out this biblical theme is helpful in our present cultural circumstance. While questions and controversies continue to swirl about in the church regarding various liturgical formats (“traditional” versus “contemporary”) and which musical instruments are to be used in worship, the path toward a genuine transformation of the church must include a biblically grounded understanding of our primary relationship with God. Witvliet wrote, “In sum, these three themes – liturgical integrity, covenant renewal, and historical recitation – are fundamental both to the world of the Former Prophets and to the practice of Christian worship today.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John D. Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 26.

<sup>4</sup> Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, 36.

Looking, then, to the Bible for how we are to understand our worship provides a position to evaluate the particular elements of worship that are grounded in the revealed transcendent Word of God, over against the pressure of postmodern cultural sensibilities regarding egalitarian desires which assert that all desires are equal. So, accordingly, it matters less the specific forms our worship is expressed through, than whether we are reflecting God's story in them.

The Book of Psalms gives us a powerful witness of the liturgical integrity Witvliet has in mind. Present across the 150 Psalms is a broad range of human experiences in relationship with God.<sup>5</sup> There are Psalms of rejoicing and there are Psalms of profound lament. Those two extremes and everything in between are experienced in a life of faith. In contrast to the stark honesty of Scripture, our present culture is reluctant to acknowledge the pain and anguish associated with every human life. Influenced by our consumerist culture which is shaped to promote the idea that the individual should always be happy and satisfied in their desires (largely through the attainment of things), our temptation in worship is to focus exclusively on praise and joy often to the exclusion of acknowledging the suffering and disappointments which are an integral aspect of human life – even a life lived in active relationship with God. Anchored in the witness of the Psalms, and other biblical books, God's narrative in Scripture never evades or ignores the whole

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<sup>5</sup> Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, 62.

spectrum of human life; happiness and sadness, joy and pain, alike. God's narrative about who we are as his creatures is brutally honest. Therefore, worship that ignores or evades such honesty lacks "liturgical integrity".

The second element of what worship today should include is a focus on the covenant making character of God. Witvliet offers this, "In sum, the concept of covenant is a primary theological matrix that stands behind vast portions of Scripture, from long series of Old Testament covenants right through to the theological interpretation of Jesus' ministry offered by the writer of Hebrews."<sup>6</sup> While the specific content and intent of the covenants in the Bible are varied, they all share one key characteristic: Biblical covenants are initiated and created by God, not human beings.

So, while worship is our response to God, it is God who has invited us and initiated the activity itself. In this way, God is the source and the generator of worship – not human beings. Reflecting their shared Reformed Tradition heritage, Witvliet and Keller are in accord on this matter. It is God who acts, we respond. To keep this covenant making character of God at the core of how we understand and implement worship corrects and deconstructs our postmodern culture's preoccupation with the sovereignty of the individual. Stated simply, worship is about God – not us.

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<sup>6</sup> Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, 77.

Witvliet calls the third element necessary for worship anchored in scripture “historical recitation”. By this he refers to the biblical witness of God active in history. God has acted in the past. God is active now. God has promised to act in the future. So, then, the question is does our worship acknowledge and celebrate God’s involvement in our lives and in the world?<sup>7</sup> The cosmology of our postmodern culture does not accept or acknowledge God’s activity in the world, the net result of this is a wide-spread sense of pessimism regarding the future of individuals, our culture, and even the world itself (e.g. fears of global destruction through nuclear war, global warming, or the vicissitudes of politics). So, in regard to worship, does our worship claim the sovereignty of God over our lives and over the life of the world, or do we deny the threats and/or accept the inevitability of man-made destruction?

To address this question Witvliet examines in some detail an issue every human being must confront: Death. How does a Christian face the reality of death? Proper worship reminds us that we live not alone but in relationship with the very sovereign God of history and all of life. Witvliet writes, “Whether a church is quiet or noisy, formal or informal, old or young, it is important that its worship teaches the skills to face death Christianly.”<sup>8</sup> His point is that through worship which is biblically anchored in the full witness of God’s narrative revealed in the Bible, and expressed

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<sup>7</sup> Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, 36.

<sup>8</sup> Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, 296.

through prayers, music, Bible readings, and preaching, we are regularly reminded that God is involved with and cares for us and the creation. Such is a powerful word against the denial, cynicism, and pessimism of a postmodern culture that believes in chaos and the human power to either sustain or destroy the created order.

Witvliet focuses on the tasks and content of biblically anchored worship, but what about the individual engaged in the act of worship? What impact does this worship have on the worshipper? How does such worship transform the person? Author James K.A. Smith, in his book *Imagining the Kingdom*, takes seriously the embodied character of our human lives. He argued that the challenge for vibrant and authentic worship in our cultural circumstances must go beyond seeking to change the dominant intellectual cultural anthropological worldview of an individual. He argues it is not enough to simply change our intellectual apprehension of the world (and/or of God), instead, we must change what we love and what we think.<sup>9</sup> What he is after in this book is to demonstrate the importance of the preconscious activity in human beings as a way to ground and encourage the formation of Christian identity. Biblically anchored worship has the potential to do this.

Smith does not dismiss the value of conscious thought or the apprehension of information and knowledge, rather his point is that the real engine of human change, or transformation, is found in the imagination and preconscious activity of

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<sup>9</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 10.

human life. In short, we seek after what we love, not always what we think. We may be able to control our intellect, but desire (love) is not intellectual. To form Christian identity through worship, we must go beyond intellectual persuasion.

Christian worship, and its specific expression through liturgy, has the effect of forming and shaping our imagination and thereby influencing what we love. Smith writes,

And this is how worship works: Christian formation is a conversion of the imagination effected by the Spirit, who recruits our most fundamental desires by a kind of narrative enchantment – by inviting us narrative animals into a story that seeps into our bones and becomes the orienting background of our being in the world.<sup>10</sup>

His argument is that through worship our imaginations are affected by the Holy Spirit and what we love and desire becomes God and God's story, over against the story of the world (any current dominant cultural anthropology that may be extra-biblical). His basic premise is that as narrative creatures we are constantly being recruited by "liturgies" of all sorts, secular and sacred. In biblically anchored worship what we love, that is what we desire, is shaped and formed. His insight is not new, it can be traced back even to St. Augustine. Nonetheless, this understanding of how human desire functions has stood the test of time.

Smith offers an important elaboration on Witvliet's work, it is important to keep in mind that worship is more than mere education and/or exhortation. It is an

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<sup>10</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 14.

embodied experience. It is life-shaping. Smith offers this about how powerful a force what we love is in our lives, “And that love/worship shapes our so called free choices; our “temple” determines all else. It is that intuition that I’m after when I claim that we are liturgical animals: in some fundamental way, we construct our world and act within it on the basis of what we worship.”<sup>11</sup> As human beings we are not merely intellectual creatures, nor are we merely victims to our bodies. Instead, we act and respond as a combination of mind and body, and biblically anchored liturgical worship is used by God to shape us.

Smith’s working definition of a liturgy can be applied to the whole scope of human life, both secular and sacred. He writes, “Liturgies are compressed repeated performed acts that over time conscript us into the story they “tell” by showing, by performing”<sup>12</sup> When our worship is anchored and shaped by the biblical witness we tell God’s story, over and over again, week after week. It is not simply the content, but also the flow and movement of the liturgy itself. Performed specifically with God’s story as revealed in the Bible worshippers are recruited into God’s story. Smith’s point is not so much the intellectual attainment of what God has done, or is doing, or has promised to do in the future, but through the liturgy our imaginations are shaped and formed to desire God and his will. In Smith’s terms, we are recruited to and by the biblical story of God’s narrative. For the purpose of this project, then,

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<sup>11</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 27.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 109.

biblically explicit worship recruits the worshipper away from an Epicurean/Enlightenment anthropology positing the absolute sovereignty of the individual, to a theological anthropology seeking to obediently respond to God's will.

While Smith explores in great detail the philosophical architectonics of the human imagination (using the works of Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu extensively), it is his insight that we are embodied creatures that offers a helpful word in the search for transformative biblically anchored worship in the church today. In most forms of traditional worship there is very little movement of the body expected. However, in newer forms of worship expression there is often a great deal of physical movement. Worshippers often stand for extended periods of time for singing. There is often much more movement in the worship space with people coming in and out. In some locations, there are large screens projecting texts for singing and unison reading. To stand and look forward inherently requires more involvement of the body than simply sitting. In newer forms of worship there is the expectation that our bodies will be a part of the worship, not simply our minds. While many "traditionalists" eschew such physicality in the act of worship, the newer forms of worship address precisely what Smith argued for in his book. Whether there is more or less movement in our worship, there remains the reality of Smith's point; that worship forms which draw our bodies into action as well as our minds affect us at a deeper level than the intellectual alone. The key is to keep the Christian story the main focus, not the

event of movement or the entertainment skill of the preacher or the band.

Witvliet helps us remain focused on the content of our biblically anchored worship. Smith makes the point that human life is more than our intellectual activity in so far as human beings are both mind and body. Indeed, we often make decisions and take actions in life based not on an intellectual process (rational thought), but on motivations which are in Smith's terms "preconscious". So, if the content of God's narrative is woven into our worship as Witvliet urges, and our presentation of God's story meets us intellectually and experientially as Smith urges, how then does the task of preaching fit in presenting the content of God's narrative in a manner that will speak to our "preconscious" self? This is what Michael Horton is after in his book, *A Better Way*. Specifically, how can we seek to encourage the formation of that "preconscious" identity reflecting God's revealed through the task of preaching?

Horton argued for an understanding of worship that is anchored in the biblical witness and offers a creative conceptual framework to view the task of worship in our present cultural circumstances. Using imagery drawn from the entertainment world of the culture at-large, Horton argued that each person lives according to a "script". That is to say a narrative scheme in how we see and understand our place in the creation.<sup>13</sup> His notion of a script for our lives is what I am calling in this project our "cultural anthropology." Horton's point is that the culture

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of Christ-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 52.

in which we live works to script us in accord with the normative and usual values and forms that are dominant in the culture.

In our present culture, that means a script which has been shaped and formed within a largely Epicurean/Enlightenment worldview that rejects the transcendent reality of God's narrative. So, then, God's narrative revealed in the Bible offers a "counter script" that is incongruous with the dominant script of the culture. Over time, part of what happens in the act of engaging in biblically anchored worship is a rescripting of our identities. Horton wrote the following in describing the act of biblically anchored worship, "Rather it is as God the Spirit works on us through the proclamation of the Word that we are rescripted: our lives, purpose, identities, and hopes conformed to that 'new world' into which the Word and Spirit give us new birth – not the other way around."<sup>14</sup> For Horton, at least in part, this is a conscious act in worship of presenting a script for human life which can be absorbed by worshippers.

Horton's imagery of a script for our lives drives right at Smith's argument of how our imagination is recruited by the liturgy of biblically anchored worship, this recruitment happens at the "preconscious" level of our being - shaping and forming our imagination – and at the intellectual level of exhortation. When we anchor our worship in God's narrative, and the cosmology which is integral to it, instead of our

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<sup>14</sup> Horton, *A Better Way*, 52.

remaking God and his Word in terms of our experience and reason, we end up being remade – caught in the action of the divine drama.<sup>15</sup> Or, in Smith’s terms, the Holy Spirit recruits us into God’s narrative. Both Horton and Smith share the belief that biblically anchored worship has the ability to reshape us in the image God intends for us. For both Smith and Horton, the power of worship to do this largely happens beyond the level of conscious thought. While some of this transformation may occur at the conscious intellectual level, the lasting transformation happens at the “preconscious” level of our imagination.

Horton wrote that individuals in our post-modern culture are scripted to see themselves not as creatures before a transcendent sovereign God (who demands our obedience to his will), but rather as sovereign individuals simply exercising our personal preferences in the various areas of our lives. Such a cultural anthropology does not grant that human life is individually accountable to anything beyond its own reason and experiences, and/or desires. Consequently, we can change and morph based on the contingent forces of the moment without referent to a transcendent reality, or authority. Such a cultural skill in the United States is immensely helpful given the rapid technological advancements humanity has experienced in recent decades (e.g. personal computers, the rise of the internet, smart phones, etc.) It is less helpful in regard to grasping God’s eternal and

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<sup>15</sup> Horton, *A Better Way*, 52.

unchanging truth revealed in the Bible, and resisting cultural movements away from accepting that revelation (e.g. “there is no absolute truth”, acceptance of same-gender sexual relationships, etc.)

Biblically anchored worship and preaching presenting God as radically sovereign fundamentally attacks this notion of constant permeability of truth based on human experience and deconstructs it. It is replaced by a theological anthropology in accord with God’s revealed narrative. For example, in Horton’s argument the task of preaching in biblically anchored worship is to rein in the protean style prevalent in our thinking and re-script us to see ourselves as accountable. He wrote, “Our purpose in preaching is to chain Proteus and to prophesy his death and resurrection in Christ. Our reference point is no longer endless choice but Jesus Christ to whose image we are being conformed.”<sup>16</sup>

Accordingly, the task of preaching in worship in our present culture is not primarily to inform or exhort, nor is it primarily to offer the finer points of knowledge regarding God’s revelation in the Bible, it is rather to invite us to give up our own narrative of who we are and what we are, and join in the grand narrative drama of who God is and what He is doing in His will. It is the call to exchange our script for God’s script. It is the call to “put on Christ” and take off the mask of individual sovereignty. In a culture that does not already know God’s story and does not

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<sup>16</sup> Horton, *A Better Way*, 57.

presume a transcendent reality to which we are accountable, such preaching offers a counter script to the culture in which we live. It is a different story. It's not a refinement of the story we already know from the culture. It's not a tweaking of a worldview, but the deconstructing of one worldview and the creation of an alternative one; a biblical worldview. Horton wrote,

The goal is to rescript our hearers, to give them another plot that draws together all their own personal histories as well as the world's into a meaningful whole that transforms even the parts. Our goal is not to accommodate the Christian plot to the shallow and destructive plots of the contemporary context but to accommodate ourselves and our hearers to the real drama of history.<sup>17</sup>

Using the grand scope of God's revelation in both the Old and new Testaments as our anchor, worship inclusive of such preaching can enable us to rescript our lives as a part of God's narrative, thereby replacing the current cultural narrative of individual sovereignty and endless choice amid rapidly changing cultural conditions. Such preaching will intentionally seek to rescript our perception of who we are, and who we may become as we put on Christ in living.

### **The Power of the Ordo to Reveal in Different Ways**

In chapter 2, we examined the biblical warrants of a four-fold ordo for worship by author Clayton J. Schmit in his book *Sent and Gathered: A Worship Manual for the Missional Church*. Here, let us consider how this ordo can function as a subversive force to attack and undermine the power of an

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<sup>17</sup> Horton, *A Better Way*, 57.

Epicurean/Enlightenment worldview when it is the primary and explicit structure of our worship, regardless of whether it is “traditional” or “contemporary” in character.

While many of the “traditional” forms of worship the church has inherited from previous centuries were created inside a Christendom cultural context, to a significant degree that cultural context has evaporated. This situation calls for a rethinking of how biblically anchored worship needs to be shaped and formed in the present. Describing the changed cultural context for the church today he wrote,

But mission today is not merely something that local churches support in foreign territories. Mission today recognizes that Western society, once firmly understood as Christendom, is now more like the early church in its pluralism and in its state of needing to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>18</sup>

Worship in a mission field cannot look or feel the same as worship inside Christendom. God’s narrative cannot be merely implicit in our worship, it must be explicit and prominent. The implicit theological anthropology present in a Christendom cultural environment can no longer be presumed.

Schmit wants to highlight the basic pattern of biblically anchored worship and argued that local innovations and expressions which follow that pattern can be varied and diverse – toward the overall goal of being missional.<sup>19</sup> The four-fold pattern, or *ordo*, is grounded in the biblical witness and tells the overall story of

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<sup>18</sup> Clayton J. Schmit, *Sent and Gathered: A Worship Manual for the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 38.

<sup>19</sup> Schmit, *Sent and Gathered*, 73.

God's activity in the world. The worship pattern he advocated is Gathering, Word, Sacrament, and Sending. People are gathered by God's activity/call. The Word is read and proclaimed. The sacraments are performed. The people are sent out into the world.

Comparing numerous liturgical traditions and denominational expressions of this pattern there are numerous elaborations and refinements of this pattern.

Schmit delves into each of these movements to explore their biblical grounding and origination. He does not advocate that this four-fold pattern must be observed in all places and at all times.<sup>20</sup> Yet in this historic biblical and broadly ecumenical organizational structure we do find a flow and rhythm for Christian worship that can be instructive as we seek to tell God's story in a culture that no longer knows that story. The key is to be intentional and explicit in making the four-fold ordo transparent in worship.

Schmidt's work identifying the essential component elements and flow of biblically anchored worship is helpful as we pursue planning and implementing worship which makes God's story explicit. Comparing various worship traditions some can be described as highly liturgical, such as Roman Catholic or Anglican, along with others. Then, we have other traditions that are considered, in comparison, less liturgical to varying degrees, such as Baptist, Pentecostal, and numerous other "free

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<sup>20</sup> Schmit, *Sent and Gathered*, 68.

church” traditions. It is often the case that adherents to one type of liturgical tradition disparage or dismiss the others. Particularly those of self-described “evangelical” traditions often dismiss the practices and rituals of highly ritualized liturgical traditions as being devoid of the power to convey meaning. The criticism is that they are mere ritual.

Quite similarly to Schmit, but with greater theological elaboration Simon Chan, in his book *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshipping Community* wrote boldly, “Unless our respective orders of service (and there could be many) conform to the basic ordo, we are not being shaped into the community we are meant to be.”<sup>21</sup> In line with Schmit, Chan argued that worship shapes and forms our worldview. Therefore, the structure of worship (regardless of how elaborate or simple it may be) is critical to the task of forming and fostering an authentic biblical Christian worldview. While Schmit is more concerned with developing a theological understanding of worship that emphasizes its “sending character” and therefore expands his definition of the ordo to include “gathering” and “sending”, Chan is more narrowly focused on elaborating how the historic order of Christian worship has centered on Word and Sacrament and the liturgical movements that grow out of them. The two authors are not in disagreement but differ in emphasis. Chan wants to encourage traditional evangelicals (who have historically been skeptical of formal

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<sup>21</sup> Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshipping Community* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 63.

liturgical expression) to see the biblical support for an expansive liturgy as an effective means to counter the worldview of postmodern people. Schmit is much more concerned with elaborating an understanding of worship that “sends” worshippers out into the world. Both positions are helpful in the task of seeking to transform worship in a cultural context that does not know God’s story.

Key to fundamentally challenging the assumptions of many regarding the church, and therefore a critical step in transformation is Chan’s point that the creation exists to serve the church, not vice versa. “The church is not an entity within the larger culture but is a culture.”<sup>22</sup> To see the matter from this perspective puts the issue in sharp relief. The church is a distinct worldview meant by God to shape our human life in the world, yet in our Epicurean/Enlightenment consumerist culture relentlessly pursuing the wants and desires of the sovereign individual, the view has become that the church is meant to serve the cultural needs of individuals. However, this misses the point that the church is a culture distinct from any culture formed from extra-biblical foundations. Chan devoted the majority of his book to explaining and elaborating on how an informed liturgical worldview is crucial to the formation of Christian identity. That is, to the formation of a biblically formed culture.

Chan is confronting a key tension within traditional evangelical Christianity; evangelicalism’s uneasiness with formal liturgy. Melanie Ross in her book *Evangelical*

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<sup>22</sup> Chan, *Liturgical Theology*, 23.

*Versus Liturgical? Defying a Dichotomy*, outlined how such uneasiness among evangelicals is rooted in a misunderstanding of the relationship between Scripture and liturgy. Drawing on the work of Aidan Kavanagh Ross she wrote, “For Kavanagh, the corrective lies in re-establishing the logical priority of liturgy over Scripture. The early church did not wait for the full development and canonization of Christian Scripture before beginning its practice of liturgical worship.”<sup>23</sup> The point being, that an experience of God (expressed in liturgical worship) preceded the written word. Ross’ book is very helpful in demonstrating that our experience of God cannot be contained in the written word.

Behind Ross’ argument is the belief that liturgy, regardless of whether it is implicitly or explicitly in view, whether it is scripted or unscripted, is always an expression of our experience of God. Worship, then, is an expression of faith, even as that faith may still be forming. Worship is our response to the invitation of God. Therefore, there is no fundamental divide between evangelical or liturgical. It is a false dichotomy.

As I have noted from Chan’s work, the church and its worship are a culture. A culture with a distinct theological anthropology as its foundation. Moreover, as I have noted numerous times thus far, the larger cultural environment in which congregations exist today is not supportive of a culture grounded in a theological

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<sup>23</sup> Melanie C. Ross, *Evangelical versus Liturgical: Defying a Dichotomy* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2014), 60.

anthropology. As Keller extensively argued, to speak the gospel revealed in the Bible we must use the signs and symbols of the culture we live in. Yet, the culture we live in the West has grown increasingly resistant and antagonistic to the Christian faith. Therefore, biblically anchored worship will acknowledge the tension, and seek to show how humans can live and frame their lives with a distinct theological anthropology in distinction from the dominant cultural anthropology surrounding them.

What Chan, Ross, Keller, Smith, and Horton recognize is that at present congregations exist in a cultural environment that, if not antagonistic to God's revealed narrative for human life, is at best not supportive of a theological anthropology for human life. Rodney Stark in his book, *The Triumph of Christianity*, did a masterful job of outlining how we have arrived at this moment in culture. Influenced and dominated by anti-religious elites, Western culture since the Enlightenment period has systematically undermined and denigrated a Christian worldview that is biblically anchored. Stark wrote, "What the proponents of 'Enlightenment' actually initiated was the tradition of angry secular attacks on religion in the name of science – attacks like those of their modern counterparts such as Carl Sagan, Daniel Dennett, and Richard Dawkins."<sup>24</sup> Stark argued, that the current cultural climate of either apathy or antagonism against Christian faith that is

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<sup>24</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 201), 252.

dominant in the West has its intellectual roots reaching approximately 700 years in the past.

Stark's work is an effort to challenge many of the assumptions posited by an Epicurean/Enlightenment worldview. Stark presents a view of Christianity that is quite out of line with the current cultural narrative of Christian history. Among numerous other topics from history, he refuted the currently accepted view in our culture that the Crusades were imperialistic and driven by greed. He argued that the Western scientific method, so treasured by secular culture today, arose only because of a Christian worldview that trusted in a created order that was knowable and dependable because God is knowable and dependable.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Stark argued that virtually all Western technological and cultural advancements since the collapse of the Roman Empire have been fostered and nurtured, not hindered or fettered, by a Christian world view.

However, concerning the question of a biblically anchored worship as a path encouraging transformation for the church today it is his claim that Christianity eventually triumphed over paganism within the Roman Empire due to its distinctive (biblical) cultural and ethical disciplines that is germane to the question of worship. The everyday ethical decisions early Christians made were formed and shaped by their understanding of their lives as a part of God's narrative, as opposed to the

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<sup>25</sup> Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 253.

pagan narrative dominant in the culture of the time.

Stark pointed to several high-profile examples of Christian ethical practices shaped and formed by their faith in his book. In the Roman Empire during periods of bubonic plague, Christians extended mercy and palliative care to victims, pagans did not. Christians did not practice female infanticide, pagans did.<sup>26</sup> Christian marriage practices allowed young girls to mature well into adolescence before marriage.<sup>27</sup> Sexual fidelity for Christians within the marriage covenant likely resulted in greater frequency of marital relations, and in turn, may well have contributed to a much higher birth rate among Christians as compared to pagan marriages.<sup>28</sup> All in all, Stark's point is that distinctive Christian behavior eventually proved more fruitful and attractive than did pagan practices. This Christian behavior undoubtedly, at least to a significant degree, was shaped and formed by God's narrative experienced in their worship.

In a related point that highlights the effective nature of distinctive Christian practices, he outlined the clear decline of many denominations in the United States, and the rise of others during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Stark carefully documented that denominations which have become less distinctive in their practices than the surrounding culture have lost more members than denominations whose practices

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<sup>26</sup> Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 127.

<sup>27</sup> Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 128.

<sup>28</sup> Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 129.

set them apart from the culture.<sup>29</sup> His point is clear, when Christian practices are maintained and expected from members, churches tend to grow. When standards and expectations are relaxed, people find participation less compelling. Another way to express this is to say that when a church looks and acts like the culture around it, there are fewer reasons to participate.

So, if the content and style of our worship merely reflects the dominant culture around us without offering a distinctive culture (Chan), what is the compelling motivation to worship? There are many authors producing self-help books advocating ways to live a more fulfilling life. The entertainment industry can produce an hour or two of escapist stories with superior production values than any church can produce. To Starks' point, then, if our worship does not provide an invitation to rescript our cultural anthropology into a theological anthropology, why participate?

Each of the above works have been instrumental in guiding and helping me to direct our congregation's pursuit of a biblically anchored worship that explicitly seeks to present God's revealed narrative. In a combined way addressing both tangible and intangible aspects of human life, these authors make the case for why we can no longer allow an implicit Epicurean/Enlightenment anthropology to go unchallenged and unexamined in worship. Taken together, they make a compelling case for an

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<sup>29</sup> Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 363.

approach to worship that explicitly presents a biblical theological anthropology inviting worshippers to participate in God's revealed narrative and allowing it to shape and form human life. In Chapter 4, we will review some preliminary input from those who worship at both our traditional" service, and at our First Worship service. Is God's narrative intentionally and explicitly made known through worship at work in forming who they are? Maybe?

## CHAPTER 4

### EXPLORING THE PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATION

#### Part 1: Background Context

In November of 2009, the congregation I serve completed a major expansion and renovation of the church's campus. We added a gymnasium. We added a Fellowship Center featuring a large gathering space, a large and functional kitchen, a choral suite for our choirs, and 17 new classrooms of various sizes. Included in this project was also a six-fold expansion of our sanctuary's narthex/gathering space. The purpose was to provide adequate ministry space for our "attractational" programmatic congregation to grow for the next 25 years.

Several years after this construction project was completed, sensing the need for our congregation to offer worship at another time other than at our 10:30am service, I asked our Session (the governing board in a PCUSA congregation) to create an Ad-Hoc worship committee to study the idea of offering worship at a different time. They agreed, and a committee was formed to study the matter in January 2012. They presented their report to the Session in May of that year. Their recommendation was to add an 8:30am service that would be limited to 45 minutes. To accomplish this time covenant for worship, we would not have a choral anthem, sing only 2 hymns, and not offer a children's sermon. This new service would use the same worship bulletin as at 10:30, and the sermon and scripture readings would be

identical.

The Session approved the recommendation without much discussion. The 8:30 service would start the following September. We would offer the service from September to May for at least the next three years. However, immediately following the vote several of the elders made almost the same comment, and almost in unison with one another. Essentially this is what they said: We have no problem with this proposal, but we want to know why this proposal is not a proposal for a contemporary service? I was startled by these statements, as I had no inkling of their sentiments prior to that meeting. The rest of the elders seemed to concur with them.

Such an idea had not been in my thinking at that point. In fact, when I had been called to the church in 2005, I was told that part of why the nominating committee was attracted to me as a candidate was that I, unlike most of the other candidates they had interviewed, did not make a suggestion that the congregation change its worship to a more contemporary format. At the time, I was a staunch advocate of maintaining the rich liturgical worship tradition as found in the Presbyterian Church (USA) Book of Common Worship called the Service for the Lord's Day. With some deviations, this was in large part, the worship format of the congregation then, and they wanted it to remain so.

With this background in mind, then, the comments about why we had not

made a proposal for a contemporary service took me by surprise! Across the summer months that followed, their comments continued to stir my thoughts, and became a regular part of my prayer life. Was this the Holy Spirit at work, nudging me personally, and our congregation corporately, to transform our worship format to something different?

I decided that these elder's comments were indeed inspired by the Holy Spirit. So, at our August meeting I proposed the creation of a new Ad-Hoc alternative worship committee to study the possibilities of adding an alternative format for worship. The Session approved the creation of the Ad-Hoc alternative worship committee, and the committee first convened in November of 2012. They worked diligently to discern whether the congregation should offer an alternative worship format beyond our 10:30 service to a contemporary service. They were committed to the notion that our current 10:30 service remain largely intact. Ultimately, in September of 2014 they recommended to the Session to leave the 10:30am service as is, and to create a new contemporary format service which would be at 9:00am. It would be called First Worship, and it would be in form a significant departure from our congregation's worship history. First Worship would begin in February 2015. Included in the approved recommendation was the elimination of the 8:30am service on *Christ the King Sunday* in November of 2014.

It was with all of this activity in regard to our worship in mind, that I began

my Doctor of Ministry tract titled “Transforming Congregations” in January 2014. It was my hope that by joining this Doctor of Ministry tract it would help equip me to better lead our congregation through this time of significant transformation in our worship life. Please recall, this was a process I had started, not by questioning how we worship, but whether we could simply offer a different time to worship.

However, God was guiding the process in different direction: A different format for worship. Keeping my congregation’s considerations of how we worship in view, my projects for the Doctor of Ministry program have focused on matters particularly germane to the worship life of the church.

My year one project was a series of study sessions with our Session using the book *A Field Guide for the Missional Congregation: Embarking on a Journey of Transformation*, by authors Richard Rouse and Craig Van Gelder.<sup>1</sup> My second year project was a worship questionnaire given to two different groups of people: Worshippers who normally attended the traditional service, and who would also agree to attend one or more of our new First Worship services, and worshippers who now normally attended the 9:00 service. My year three project was to lead three focus groups, a group of people who attend the traditional service, a group of people now attending our First Worship service, and a focus group meeting with our Session. Each group would respond to the same set of questions. What follows is a

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<sup>1</sup> Richard W. Rouse and Craig Van Gelder, *A Field Guide for the Missional Congregation: Embarking on a Journey of Transformation* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2008).

report of how these projects unfolded.

### **Year One: Introducing the Session to Consider a Changing Cultural Context**

Using the book, *A Field Guide For the Missional Congregation; Embarking on a Journey of Transformation*, by Rouse and Van Gelder as our starting point for discussion we held a series of three sessions. My purpose was to initiate a discussion of what it means to be “missional” in our contemporary cultural context, especially regarding how we worship. In a broad way that is accessible for lay people and not just clergy, this book effectively raises many of the important questions a church faces in our changing cultural context. The Session was willing to cooperate with my request for them to study this book, although there did not appear to be much enthusiasm for the task.

So, we began a conversation around the challenges of seeking transformation in our church according to an explicitly biblical theological anthropology, rather than exclusively continuing to seek transformation using “attractional methodologies”. These methodologies, which it must be admitted, had proven relatively fruitful in many respects, as the congregation had experienced steady growth in membership over the previous 20 plus years.

Specifically, during the previous 9 years of my pastorate the church annually experienced continued net membership growth. Just recently we had completed the largest building program and expansion of ministry capability in the church’s history,

and we were successfully servicing a financial indebtedness of approximately \$2.4 million. In 2012, we had an operational income of slightly more than \$400,000. We also received approximately \$188, 000 in building fund contributions. So, given the relative health and financial stability of the congregation, it is perhaps not surprising that several of the elders were somewhat reluctant to open this discussion. The Session was generally satisfied with the church and were wary of charting a new path.

However, virtually all of our membership growth in recent years had come from Letter of Transfer, with less than two percent coming from Profession of Faith or Reaffirmation of Faith. To date during my pastorate, we had only had three adult Baptisms. As such, we were not growing by reaching the unchurched population in our community. Undoubtedly, there was more we could do to reach those we were not reaching.

It was this framing of our context which helped me persuade them to participate in this study. They were asked to read the Rouse/Van Gelder book in the hope that we could have a conversation about how to do just that; to reach more of the unchurched.

Our study was over a three-month period. During three successive stated monthly meetings of the Session we devoted approximately 30 minutes at each month's stated Session meeting to reviewing the material in chapters 1-3, 4-6, and 7-

9 respectively. I have included my session presentation notes in Appendix A. In an attempt to gauge any possible shift in their understandings of the church and the challenges we face in our present fading Christendom cultural context, the elders were asked to complete two separate, but related surveys that queried them regarding their perspectives and experiences of Trinity Presbyterian Church. They completed these surveys prior to our first discussion, and again immediately following our third and final discussion of the material. The source for these surveys is the book *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*. Please see the surveys used in Appendix B.

One survey focused on issues of congregational identity. The other survey addressed ministry tasks of the church. These two instruments were chosen in order to try and identify the perceptions of the elders regarding how they viewed the purpose and tasks of our church before considering the particular issues of seeking to be a missional congregation in a post-Christendom culture, and after exposure to these issues. Interestingly, despite exposure to these issues, a comparison of the pre-and post-study surveys revealed VERY LITTLE change in the perceptions of the elders.

On the post-study surveys, there was a slight increase in their awareness that our present worship form and language was not effective in reaching unchurched people. Slight in this instance means one additional elder marked the “more” box

indicating we needed to be more sensitive to the needs of unchurched people than we had been. On several other questions, there was also a slight shift toward more awareness that our congregation is focused more inward on its own membership rather than focused outward toward the community. There was not a single question on either survey that revealed a change of more than 1 elder away from their initial responses. Overall, it appears exposure to the issues and challenges raised by the Rouse/Van Gelder book had little measurable effect on their perceptions of congregational identity or areas of ministry emphasis.

In part, this lack of change may be attributed to my inadequacies as a discussion facilitator. In part, it may reflect a lack of attention given to the questions by the elders. However, in all three discussion sessions of the book there was lively conversation and apparent engagement by the elders. My assessment is that the lack of change in their perceptions reflects not so much on my talents, nor does it reflect a lack of interest on their part. Rather, it illuminates the magnitude of the challenge our congregation faces to transform from a self-perception as “the local franchise of Christendom” encouraging and nurturing people who already know and accept God’s narrative for their life, to a self-perception as an intentional missional community called by God to invite people who do not see their lives as a part of God’s life to begin to do so.

The survey results revealed that the elders were generally satisfied with the

present form and character of our church: A form and character that indeed emphasizes and excels in the Ephesians 4:11 ministry offices of shepherd and teacher for the “already gathered” community.

In my Presbyterian tradition, the Session members are considered the spiritual leaders of the local church. Accordingly, as our congregation was about to embark on a new path with the addition of a new worship format as a part of our life together, I felt it important to acquaint these leaders with many of the reasons why I felt this addition was a necessary one.

In its discernment on how to create this new worship format, the Ad-Hoc alternative worship committee had operated with the notion that what we were after with this new service was something other than just a service featuring less formal liturgical elements and different music than our 10:30 service. If that were our goal, this new service would be seen as just one more element of our “attractional” efforts designed to gather in those who already saw their lives as a part of God’s narrative.

By conducting this three-session study with our congregation’s spiritual leaders, it was my goal to help them see this effort as something more than one more strategy of a Christendom congregation attracting people to our congregation. Our goal was to fundamentally make explicit the theological and biblical warrants for a four-fold ordo of worship which were implicitly present in our traditional worship

service, but to make them more explicit and discernible in “First Worship”, so that someone who did not already know God’s story would find the worship meaningful.

### **Year Two Project: What is Happening in Our Worship Services?**

We implemented our First Worship service in February 2015. As a part of my Doctor of Ministry year two project I wanted to check in with a number of people who having previously regularly worshiped at our 10:30am service and now had become regular worshippers at First Worship. In addition, I wanted to survey how people who continued to worship at 10:30 would compare the two services if they would agree to attend at least one First Worship experience. Primarily, I was interested in seeking to discern what effect the addition of First Worship and the changes in worship format, scripture selection for worship, and preaching style, for our worship life at Trinity Presbyterian Church might be occurring.

So, I created two worship surveys. One survey was for people who previously had attended our traditional service, but who now were attending our First Worship service. Eight people completed this survey. The second survey was for people who were willing to attend both services on at least one Sunday. Five people completed this survey. The surveys can be found Appendix C. The following is a brief summary of their responses in narrative form.

## **First Worship Attendees Questionnaire**

**Question 1: In one or two sentences how would you describe the differences and similarities between First Worship and 10:30 Worship?**

Generally, most respondents mentioned in some way that they liked the more casual and informal atmosphere of First Worship. Noteworthy was one respondent's remark *"Participating in First Worship we worship as opposed to just attending church."*

**Question 2: Is there anything that you love from 10:30 that is missing from First Worship?**

Most respondents did not miss anything from the traditional service. Others indicated they missed particular elements of the formal liturgy, such as the Apostles' Creed and weekly use of the Lord's Prayer.

**Question 3: What have you noticed that is different in the sermon offered at First Worship from your previous experiences at 10:30 worship?**

Every respondent reacted positively to the informal sermon delivery style in which I walk around on the main floor. I never enter the pulpit or the raised chancel area while preaching. Some expressed their appreciation for the more informal, and at times, more passionate delivery.

**Question 4: In what way(s), if any, does the delivery of the sermon from outside of the pulpit affect your experience of worship?**

The clear theme in their responses was that preaching on the same level as the congregation has been positively received and appreciated. The general perception from the respondents was that the sermon so delivered was more immediate and personal.

**Question 5: How does the use of video projection during First Worship impact your experience of worship?**

Most respondents appreciated the use of video projection for singing and for corporate prayer. We use minimal graphics and do not use prepared videos. Some would like us to use bolder graphics. Some are still growing comfortable with seeing this technology in worship.

**Question 6: How has the act of coming forward to make an offering in First Worship changed how you see the offering within the context of worship?**

Not everyone participates in the written offerings to God. It is still new. Some are resistant. Most appreciate the active participation it requires of them. Of note, several have discovered meaning in the opportunity to make an offering from themselves, beyond their money, in worship.

**Question 7: The closing of First Worship is done differently from 10:30 Worship.**

**What are the differences you have noticed?**

Some appreciate the explicit charge to follow God out into the world, others would like to see a more formal benediction.

**Question 8: First Worship and 10:30 Worship include music as a part of worship.**

**How would you describe the difference in the music, and how has it affected your experience of worship?**

All respondents reacted positively to the different role music (a wider variety of instruments and more recently composed songs) plays in First Worship. The respondents used different vocabulary in their responses, but essentially, they perceived it as more uplifting and meaningful than traditional hymnody.

**Question 9: What could we do differently in First Worship that would enrich your worship experience?**

Some indicated they would like to see more formal elements of traditional worship brought into the service. Some want to increase the amount of video.

**Question 10: Is there any other comment(s) you would like to share to describe how First Worship has affected your worship life here at Trinity?**

Most indicated they appreciated being asked their input. Several took the opportunity to add complimentary remarks regarding the service experience overall, several noted the music as an improvement over the music at the traditional service.

### **First Worship & 10:30 Worship Attendees Experiences Questionnaire**

**Question 1: It has been said there is a different “feel” in the sanctuary between First Worship and 10:30 Worship? How would you describe the difference?**

Most respondents indicated that the more informal atmosphere of First Worship is a positive over the atmosphere of the traditional service. Although one respondent was quite adamant in her feelings that the traditional service was “warmer and friendlier” than First Worship.

**Question 2: How would you describe the difference (if any) in the delivery of the sermon between First Worship and 10:30 Worship?**

All respondents mentioned they appreciated the delivery of the sermon from the same level as the congregation. Several mentioned that First Worship sermons “feel” more like a teaching experience rather than a sermon. Of particular note, was this comment about the First Worship sermons *“It feels more about developing a relationship with God – as opposed to an infusion of doctrine.”*

**Question 3: How would you describe the difference (if any) of the content of the sermon from First Worship to 10:30 Worship?**

All respondents indicated they perceived the content of the sermon as basically the same at both First Worship and traditional worship. Most respondents indicated that the primary difference between the sermons was the delivery.

**Question 4: How does the worship leadership of the choir affect your experience of worship at 10:30 from what you experience at First Worship?**

It is interesting to note that several of the respondents distinguished the role of the choir at the traditional service versus the role of music in general in First Worship. Succinctly stated, the perception is the chancel choir leads and performs music for the congregation. In contrast, music at First Worship is always a congregational event, everyone is invited to sing.

**Question 5: Corporate prayers are a part of both services; how would you describe the difference in how you participate in corporate prayer from First Worship to 10:30 Worship?**

Several respondents mentioned that the receiving of prayer requests during the service made a difference for them, allowing them to feel more deeply connected to prayer in worship. However, several others indicated that they perceived no difference between prayer at First Worship and the traditional service.

**What Did the Responses Reveal?**

While these surveys were broadly worded, and intentionally open-ended in the character of their questions, they did serve my intended purpose of receiving early feedback on how First Worship was being experienced by both people who had adopted First Worship as their choice for a worship experience, and those who had not. The purpose was to get feedback on how the implementation of a service

intentionally and deliberately designed to make explicit the four-fold order was experienced in contrast to the traditional service wherein the four-fold ordo is implicit, but not explicated clearly.

One unintended benefit of implementing our First Worship service is how it may have affected the committee members of the Ad-Hoc group who created our new format. The work of the Ad-Hoc alternative worship committee in planning and implementing our new First Worship involved (including spouses) approximately 30 existing members of the church. These people were intimately involved in researching and shaping what our new service would look like and sound like. Members of this committee and their spouses attended in excess of 15 different contemporary services in congregations within a fifty-mile radius of our congregation. These people now have an increased sensitivity and awareness of what worship is and how the Bible calls us to engage in worship. How this may transform them over time remains to be seen, but these differing worship experiences are now a part of these people's lives.

What our First Worship looks and sounds like very much reflects the biblical and historical four-fold ordo of gathering, Word, sacrament, and sending. Even though this service is a very different experience from our traditional service in that it does not employ a choir, a printed order, or traditional hymnody, it does follow the same ordo as the traditional service. The majority of people attending First Worship had

previously attended our traditional service before they gave First Worship a try, and they have stayed with First Worship. How this worship is transforming them to enter God's narrative more fully, only time will tell.

Many congregations which have tried similar additions to their worship options have experienced significant internal conflict. To date, while there are some who have made it plain worshipping at First Worship is not meaningful for them, our congregation has experienced relatively minor internal conflict over the addition of this new service. Partly, this is because we left the traditional service largely intact. Many who are more comfortable with the traditional service have expressed that they understand why we as a congregation are called to offer it - it's just not for them. The vestiges, and expectations, of Christendom remain a force in our context, it is important that we continue to honor that reality.

It is challenging to plan and implement two quite distinct worship services for the same congregation. We are seeking to respond to God's call to worship him by enacting his story in a variety of ways reflecting a changing cultural context, while at the same time continuing a format for worship that is considered traditional. Nonetheless, in all of our worship, whether it is First Worship or in our traditional service, we are seeking to remember God's actions in the past, and we are eagerly anticipating what God will do in the future.

### **Year Three Project: Focus Group Responses**

My year three project was to conduct three different focus group discussions. One with people who worship at our traditional service. One with people who worship at our First Worship service. One with our Session. Of the Session members who participated in this focus group discussion, approximately three quarters of them regularly worship at the traditional service. I have included the discussion questions in Appendix D. However, in order to facilitate reading I have also included the questions in the narrative report for two of these groups.

#### **Traditional Worship Focus Group**

We had 9 out of 12 people invited participate. No one actively declined, those who did not participate were either were out of town, or had other obligations that evening. We had a mix of males and females, with one more female than male. The youngest participant was approximately 34, the oldest past 80.

#### **Question 1: What are the primary reasons you are drawn to worship?**

Several of the participants shared that it was important to them to gather in a formal setting with like-minded believers. This theme of shared fellowship with other believers was brought up repeatedly. The idea of the fellowship of the church expressed during worship came to the foreground again, and again.

One woman, in her late 70's said this, *"The way you were is the way you are."* When asked to elaborate, she said she had been taken to worship as a child every

week, and now as an adult going to church was simply a part of who she was. So, she had been taken to worship, and so now she went to worship. It was clear from the remarks of those who spoke, the discipline of attending worship regularly shaped and guided their lives.

For example, a retired college professor expressed his thoughts this way, *“It is a commitment I have made, and so I expect to go to church.”* The commitment he was referring to was his faith in Jesus Christ. So, indeed, he believes worship is a commitment we make. The discipline of attending worship is an integral element of his identity.

Virtually all of the participants gave voice in one way or another that they came to worship expecting to find the presence of God in worship. Their point was that in the act of coming to worship, they anticipated something different than an experience of everyday life. The ritual and repeated acts of the traditional Service for The Lord’s Day gives them a distinct experience not found in other parts of life.

One man said this, *“I come to worship to learn more about God and the Bible in fellowship with other church members.”* His words give witness to the reality that worship is about God’s narrative as we experience it together. His comment implied that we don’t “learn” about God outside of the biblical narrative, which is the content of our worship.

What these comments reveal is the power of corporate worship to shape and

form personal identity. The fact that most of these people had been taken to worship as children is significant. The fact that they had continued to worship as adults has apparently sustained a process of identity formation first begun as children. The outcome of their practice of attending worship is strong sense of Christian identity. Their experience of corporate worship over the years has shaped what Smith calls “preconscious activity” in a way that they now see worship as an integral aspect of their lives.

The formal structure of the traditional Service for the Lord’s Day offers comfort and strength for these people. To one degree or another, they grasp that there is meaning in the set rituals and movements of the traditional service.

**Question 2: What is the Most Spiritually Moving Element of Worship for You?**

The most popular response by the participants was by far “communion”. Interestingly, the term Lord’s Supper was never used. Although two people who had previously been members of Roman Catholic congregations used the term “holy communion”. The manner in which the Lord’s Supper is celebrated at Trinity is quite traditional and is derived right from the PC (USA) Book of Common Worship.<sup>2</sup>

Speaking beyond the issue of the Lord’s Supper, a woman in her 70’s said, *“It really depends on where I am spiritually from the week before. Sometimes it is confession. Sometimes it is the music.”* So, she is connecting the narrative of worship

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<sup>2</sup> Presbyterian Church (USA). *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

with the events of her daily life. The regimented format of the traditional service is not an impediment for her. In fact, depending on the circumstances of her life, the different elements of the service have greater affect in her life than others at different times. Her comment reflects that she understands, to some degree, what the different component parts of our traditional worship mean and communicate.

Another woman, also in her 70's said, *"The organ music, I love to hear the hymns played on the organ."* This woman expects to hear the organ played in worship. She may, or may not, understand the music itself, but for her, worship involves organ music. It is likely that worship is the only place in her regular routine of life that an organ is played. Her comment reflects what Smith argued in his book *Imagining the Kingdom*, the power of desire to shape and form human life. The organ music touches her life in ways beyond the intellectual.

A man in his 70's remarked, *"For me, it is the sermons on obedience to the sovereignty of God."* He further remarked, *"I like it when the sermons speak into the larger community outside of the church; when they speak to issues beyond the church community."* He added, *"Sermons that address the larger world in connection with God's Word."* For this man, the revealed narrative of the Bible is connected to all of creation. What God has to say through Scripture is intended to affect the entire creation, not just the congregation and individual disciples.

One woman said, *"It is the sustained connected reading of Scripture and*

*sermons connecting my individual life with God's life.*" Our traditional service format is effective at helping this woman see her life narrative as a part of God's larger narrative for the world.

A woman who is well-educated and highly trained in the performance arts stated how important it was to her when the person reading Scripture did so with an understanding of the text in its context. She added that she really appreciated it when Scripture was read clearly, and with dramatic inflection. She also remarked how much it meant to her when she was in worship and an adult Baptism took place, stating that she *"cried every time."* Her comments reveal that through the passionate and deliberate reading of God's Word in worship, she experienced ancient texts as current. In this way, she is able to connect her individual narrative with God's revealed narrative in Scripture.

Several participants remarked on how meaningful for them it was to recite the Apostles' Creed communally with others. Their comments indicate that there remains incredible power in the ancient and enduring words of a profession of faith several thousand years old. Taken as a whole, what these comments reveal is that when gathered in community with others, there is power to transform lives released when a common faith is enacted in ancient rituals and claimed each week.

**Question 3: How Does Worship Facilitate/Encourage you to Connect to God in Your Life?**

Several responses spoke of how celebrating communion “*connects me to God*”. They began to discuss different methods of serving communion; pew communion and intinction. Most had experienced it both ways, some preferred one method over the other but all were accepting of either method – so long as it was “*reverent*.” One man spoke how he wished we would more often connect the Old Testament and New Testament readings during the celebration of communion. For him, Scripture is a sustained narrative of God’s narrative, and we become a part of that narrative by participating in the sacrament specifically, and more generally in worship itself.

A woman well into her 80’ spoke passionately about how meaningful it had been for her serve the elements during communion. As a long ordained elder in the Presbyterian Church (USA), she said it was “*meaningful*” to her to extend the elements others. What her comment revealed is that she understood her part in God’s narrative, and she valued the role she could play in extending that narrative to others.

One man, in his late 60’s said that he truly appreciated the times of silent prayer during worship. So, for him, while the times of silent prayer may be considered as “mere ritual” by some, they are times of intense participation in the

act of worship.

Another person said, *"I love appreciating the majesty of God and being reminded that we are loved – no matter what."* For this person, the grand narrative of God's story revealed in Scripture speaks a powerful word against the dominant cultural ethos that human beings can be valued more or less based on the circumstances of their lives.

A man in his 30's remarked that worship helped him take the message of God, and apply it to his daily life. For him, he perceives a connection between the revealed narrative of God's story in Scripture and his individual narrative.

Taken together, their responses indicated that weekly participation in the ritual forms and practices of our traditional service offer a framework and context for living their lives outside of worship. Generally, these people know God's story and see their lives as a part of that story.

**Question 4: How Would You Describe the Impact of Worship in Your Life?**

One participant said, *"Worship reinforces my life."* So, for this person, the narrative of the four-fold order of worship has the power to shape and guide human life. Worship "reinforces" how this person already views human life. This person already frames life within the revealed theological anthropology of God's narrative.

One man in early 70's remarked, *"It is my faith that restores me in times of loss."* This man's Christian identity helps him face the disappointments which

accompany every human life. Worship reinforces his identity as a child of God, connected to a reality that transcends his immediate circumstances. In alignment with Smith's perspective that biblically anchored worship prepares individuals for living inside God's narrative as they face the vicissitudes of human life, this man experiences his personal losses in a larger context than just his individual narrative.

One participant said this, *"Worship decenters me, it reminds me that it is not about me, but about God."* While it is largely implicit, our traditional service closely adheres to Schmidt's identified four-fold order, and this woman grasps she is participating in a narrative that is larger than her narrative. Her comment is a powerful example of how both Witvliet and Keller argue that worship is properly focused on God's activity – not human activity.

Another added this about the impact of worship in her life, *"Worship reminds me to give thanks – always."* The notion of giving thanks is inherently a response to some prior action. For her, this comment indicates that she has grasped that God is responsible for her granting her life, and she is grateful for her life. Her life is not a coincidence of biological cells, she is a "created creature."

One man said this, *"Worship gives us the bigger picture, there is more than us."* Again, the act of worship is perceived as the act of participating in a grand narrative (God's narrative) that transcends individual narratives.

### **Question 5: In What Way is the Act of Worship Connected to Your Daily Life?**

One participant said, *“Worship is so much more than church, but it happens in daily life.”* This remarks reveals that a theological anthropology is present and determinative in this person’s life. This person frames his life inside of God’s revealed narrative.

One person said, *“Worship leads me to help others in life”* She then added, *“Worship helps me to remember to always be kind to others, even when they are not kind.”* Another man added, *“My identity goes with me as I interact with others.”* Several others in the focus group added, almost in unison, *“Worship sustains me.”* These participants perceive their lives as unfolding within the larger context of God’s revealed narrative for human life.

One woman shared this, *“The worship order communicates God’s presence.”* Following her comment, a man remarked, *“The order of worship flows, it works together as a whole.”* Another person chimed in, *“The whole service is important.”* An older lady added, *“Worship allows the whole congregation to participate.”* While they would likely not express these sentiments in the formal language of theology, what these various comments reveal is that these individuals do understand the internal biblical and theological coherence of the Service for the Lord’s Day traditional service movements. To some degree, they grasp that the service is designed and ordered to reflect our individual experience of God in a corporate

setting.

By participating in our traditional worship, these individuals are experiencing a connection between the narratives of their lives within the context of God's revealed narrative.

### **Summary**

The responses from these people who worship in our traditional service reflect their deep appreciation for the style and format of worship which has characterized our Presbyterian tradition, and the history of worship in this congregation, for a very long time. It is orderly worship, it is scripted, and it uses a very formal musical instrument – an electronic organ. Singing comes from either the hymnal, or from a rehearsed choir in robes. Clergy are expected to wear vestments. Corporate prayers are printed, and normally come from the Presbyterian Church (USA) Book of Common Worship. It is worship that is predictable and dependable in its formal movements, and that is clearly an essential part of its power to shape and form identity. It is Christendom worship in that the biblical narrative for defining and shaping human life is assumed. From the responses of these individuals we can determine that it remains a powerful format to communicate God's revealed narrative, for those who know it and accept it as authoritative for their lives.

So, then, at its best, it continues to tell God's story in a form that powerfully shapes and informs identity. It has this power for those who already understand its

implicit theological anthropology anchored in God's revealed narrative. These individuals are prepared to participate in, and expect to receive God's story through this traditional format of worship. What is not so clear is, does this form of worship communicate God's narrative to those who are not prepared to receive it? Perhaps, but, it also appears that the learning curve is sharp for those who are not already steeped in God's narrative to grasp and discover meaning in this format for worship.

### **First worship Focus Group**

12 people were invited to participate in this focus group as well. 8 people actually participated. Several did not respond before the day of the focus group. One sent me an email with his responses to the questions. After it took place, the others invited, but not in attendance, apologized for their absence by saying they either forgot the date, or simply had not opened their mail until after the group discussion took place. We had 5 females and 3 males. Their ages ranged from late 40's to middle 70's.

#### **Question 1: What are the primary reasons you are drawn to worship?**

One man said church was a "habit". *"If it is Sunday, I better be in church."* For this man, participating in God's story through worship is integral to his life.

Another man in his early 70's said this, *"When I was younger I was very involved in church, but then life got busy and it has been many years since my wife and I have*

*gone to church. A few years ago, we felt the need to find a church. We shopped around visiting quite a few. But, then, we found this one. We both felt the need to grow spiritually and we have found that here."* When he and his wife first started worshipping at Trinity, they attended our traditional service, and our First Worship. They wanted to know what both services were like. Eventually, they adopted the First Worship service as the one they would attend.

After not participating in worship for several decades, they experienced the format of First Worship as more meaningful for them. We learn something quite important in this man's comment. They came to worship already knowing to some degree God's narrative, but they had not participated actively in a worshipping community for several decades. However, when they felt drawn to once more worship, they found the informal more explicitly narrative format of First Worship more to their liking.

Another man in his 70's said, *"I come to church because I need guidance."* He then added, *"I come to find out how I am doing in life."* His remark reveals that he desires to actively measure how he lives his life through the lens of God's revealed narrative for human life. This individual has been irregular in his attendance at our traditional service for a number of years. However, since he has experienced First Worship, he is markedly more regular in worship attendance.

Well over half of the participants in this focus group said they were drawn to

worship because they felt the need for fellowship with others, and to receive instruction in life. They want to participate in God's narrative for human life.

One of the most interesting comments in response to this question came from a man who described his reason for coming to worship as *"seeking a romantic connection to God."* I found this quite interesting, so I asked him to elaborate a bit more. What he meant was something akin to what others had described as fellowship; he was expressing his desire to be in relationship with God, while being in relationship with others.

In this group's responses I found much the same sentiment as from the traditional service focus group participants, worship shapes and forms their personal identity.

**Question 2: What is the Most Spiritually Moving Element of Worship for You?**

Most participants spoke to how powerful it was to be in community with others, while in prayer, while singing, and while hearing Scripture.

A woman in her middle 60's said this, *"It changes week to week. Sometimes it is the music. Sometimes it is the sermon."* Her comment was almost word for word what a participant in the previous focus group had said regarding worship. A man said this, *"I like the idea of being a part of a spiritual family."* Another man said, *"The sermon speaks to me."* A woman in her 60's said this, *"The music is key to moving me spiritually"* One participant said, *"The benediction as a blessing, telling me that*

*all is well in my life.*” Understood together, these responses all indicate the impact of the liturgical movements of First Worship (informally expressed) on people who attend. It is the power of the liturgy at work in their lives rescripting how they frame and experience life itself.

In this group’s responses to this question it became clear that the relatively more active and participatory character of First Worship, as compared with our traditional service, has touched them. They like the style of music. They like the lack of formality. They enjoy the more animated delivery of the sermon as it comes from the main floor as opposed to from the elevated chancel. They like the fact that they have opportunity to guide what we pray about during worship. They like how they are asked to come forward with their offerings.

**Question 3: How Does Worship Facilitate/Encourage you to Connect to God in Your Life?**

One man in his late 50’s responded, *“It energizes me for the week.”* Through his participation in worship he is empowered to reconnect his individual narrative with the revealed narrative of God’s story anchored in Scripture. Another added, *“The benediction connects my worship with my everyday life.”* What he is likely referencing is the expanded charge and benediction that is offered at the end of First Worship, as opposed to the simple and traditional benediction used at the later service which does not feature a charge. A man in his 40’s said, *“I learn more about*

*God's word for me.*" He is looking for ways to increase his participation in God's revealed narrative. He desires God's narrative to inform his narrative. Each of these comments point to how the narrative of worship helps shape and form life outside of worship.

There was one comment that was quite different from the others. It was a comment that points to how the "script" of biblically anchored worship can spill out into everyday life. This individual spoke at length on how worship reminded her she is supposed to pray for others. She described how in First Worship we ask for worshippers to share any prayer concerns they may have, and often people seek prayers for friends and family members facing illness. This weekly practice in worship motivates her to pray for others outside of worship.

**Question 4: how Would You Describe the Impact of Worship in Your Life?**

Most everyone in the focus group spoke about how the informality of First Worship engaged them in ways traditional worship did not. One woman said, *"With the way you do the sermon it keeps my attention. In traditional worship, when you do the sermon up in the pulpit I just go to sleep."* This is a person who has been regular in worship attendance for many years. Her remark raises a question: Is sermon delivery style more important than content? Or, is it that she has been trained to receive information by a culture of entertainment, so a peripatetic preacher is more entertaining? Interesting questions, but no definitive conclusions.

Several members of the focus group mentioned how the video projection of song lyrics and prayers was powerful for them. They liked the fact that they were asked to stand and look up, as opposed to having their faces down in a book. One of the most interesting comments was from someone who said, *“I can’t explain it, but it just seems more alive to me to use the screens. The prayers come one or two lines at a time. And, when we sing, it’s just a few words at a time versus reading verse 1 and then verse 2, in the hymnal.”* His comment reveals something quite important. In accord with Smith’s view that worship must engage our entire being, the physicality of First Worship involves the body to a much larger degree than does traditional worship. When worship invites the active involvement of individuals, it becomes a dynamic movement of life happening in the moment, not simply checking off the list of scheduled tasks for the hour. Not unlike how when someone is walking, paying attention to what is before you is important, worship that invites constant attentiveness engages us differently when we are moving.

One woman shared how she and her friend had been a couple for 14 years, and engaged for 8. Both had been married previously and were somewhat cynical about marriage. This is what she said, *“Since coming to Trinity, and meeting with Marc, we just decided we had to do the right thing and get married. So, we are getting married in October.”* Her statement, in the context of this question was powerful. It revealed how her experience of worship had led her and her fiancée to, in her words, *“do the*

*right thing*” in God’s eyes. They had come to see their lives within the revealed narrative of God’s story. By participating in First Worship, they felt an increased draw to shape their lives in accord with God’s narrative for human life.

A man simply said, *“Worship confirms what we believe.”* This comment reveals that this man has embraced a theological anthropology grounded in the revealed narrative of the Bible. The narrative quality of First Worship affirms his understanding of who he is in light of God’s revealed narrative for human life.

**Question 5: In What Way is the Act of Worship Connected to Your Daily Life?**

A woman whose occupation brings her into regular contact with people who are ill and frail, and in her words *“whose time is short”* shared that worship prepares her for the issues she must face each day. Her comment reveals the power of what Witvliet wrote concerning how Christians perceive death. When worship is grounded in the biblical narrative for human life, it does prepare us to face death “Christianly.”

Someone said, *“Worship confirms and reshapes us for life.”* This comment is a remarkable echo of Horton’s view that biblically anchored worship invites us to re-script our lives by “putting on Christ.” This person’s comment affirms his point. As people participate in worship that intentionally and explicitly seeks to manifest God’s revealed narrative for human life it has the power to change us, to transform us, more in accord with God’s will.

A man in his late 60’s said, *“It connects everything in life we do, and it’s a road*

*map.*" He also added this, "*Church never changes, it reminds me that there is something good.*" I interpreted this statement to mean that God's narrative never changes, and while there is much in the world that is disappointing and difficult, worship reminds us that God is good. His statement regarding how church never changes was intended to say that God's Word never changes, even as the world around us does change. This man has been in worship virtually his entire life. He had been a vocal critic of the congregation offering First Worship. Yet, he came to experience it, and now has adopted it as his preferred worship format.

A woman said this, "*The song of worship sustains me through the week.*" Her statement speaks to the reality that we experience God in ways beyond the intellect. Song, or music comes from both the mind and the heart. As Smith argued in his book, worship does have the power to transform our pre-cognitive activity. As Reggie Kidd has noted, music or singing, has a way of connecting us to God, and it appears to have the power of connecting God to us.

A man said, "*The focus is on the Word.*" Our First Worship format seeks to relentlessly make manifest God's narrative. Through the framing and explaining of each act within worship, the focus is continually turned away from us, and toward the activity of God.

## Summary

In ways quite similar to the responses from our traditional service focus group, the responses from this focus group clearly indicate that our First Worship service does tell God's revealed narrative. The perceived distinction from the traditional service is form and comportment, not the content. However, it is their participation in this distinct form that appears to make the difference for those who attend. From their responses, it does seem that form affects how content is received.

For these people, the style of the music and the instrumentation used in worship does make a difference. The use of the video projection for prayers and song lyrics is more meaningful to them than a printed bulletin and singing from a hymnal. What these people gave voice to was more than just a comparison of the mechanics of reading from a printed bulletin and standing facing up. What their comments gave voice to was an experience of worship in which their entire being was invited to engage and participate. Clearly, the relative informality of First Worship in concert with their use of their body to worship, is experienced by them as somehow more authentic and vibrant than the scripted traditional service format.

The reading of Scripture, and the delivery of the sermon from the main floor is being experienced as an interaction with God's Word which is more immediate and personal than reading and preaching from behind a raised pulpit. While the same sermon notes are used for preaching at both services on a given Sunday, the

preaching at “First Worship” is received as something more alive, relative to a sermon preached in a robe from behind a pulpit. Moreover, when the sermon is delivered at the same level as the people, and the preacher is in motion, and often ventures quite close to the congregation, the sermon is experienced in a more personal way.

### **Session Focus Group**

In this focus group we had eight of twelve elders present. Five males, and three females. In our polity, elders serve a three- year term of service, so this was not the same group of elders who had participated in the study of the Rouse/Van Gelder material from three years prior. Only three of these elders were serving on the Session when the decision to implement our First Worship was made. However, it is important to note that as of the time of the focus group, October 2016, First Worship service had been offered for almost two years. So, these are the elders who are currently guiding our congregation’s diversity of worship formats. Of the eight who participated, two regularly attend First Worship and the others our traditional service. All of the elders who participated were over forty years of age.

I want to share this focus group’s discussion a bit differently than the other two. Why? Well, what I learned from this discussion is that their responses to the questions of the worship survey tracked in close parallel with the other two group’s responses. While their words, and manner of expression were, of course, unique to

them as individuals, to a remarkable degree their responses were not materially distinguishable from the other two groups.

For example, those who attend the traditional service find the formality of the liturgy and music style relying on organ and/or piano as critically important. This format for worship continues to carry the power to inspire and guide these elders. Their responses were in very close alignment with the traditional worship focus group responses. For those elders who choose to participate in our First Worship service, the relaxed and informal liturgy of the four-fold ordo and peripatetic style of preaching delivery, along with the more varied instrumentation and more recently composed songs, are key to their experience of worship.

Moreover, it is interesting to note that among the “traditionalists” there remains a certain reluctance to embrace the format of First Worship with its livelier and more varied instrumentation, its more relaxed implementation of the four-fold ordo, and its more physical style of engagement in worship. What often (but not always!) goes unstated from such people is the suspicion that such worship really is not worship at all. For example, one elder in his mid-seventies said this about worship, *“I suppose the more modern stuff is okay, but for me, it is just not worship without the organ, traditional music, and the hymns.”*

In turn, from those who have adopted First Worship there is a reluctance to speak negatively about traditional worship. For example, one elder in her early fifties

said this about how we lead the confessional time, *“I really appreciate how in First Worship we sing a song of assurance following the confession. The music is moving for me, it draws me back to Christ. In the traditional service the assurance of pardon is always just spoken. That is okay, but singing it is more meaningful for me.”* Her comment affirms Witvliet, Smith, Kidd, and numerous others contention that worship needs to engage us both bodily and spiritually. Moreover, it is instructive to know that this is someone who is a life-long Presbyterian and has worshipped in this congregation for virtually her entire life. So, she appreciates the traditional, but finds the newer format to speak to her in ways the other does not.

This group of elders were representative of the congregation at large. There are some who are comfortable with and appreciate the implicit four-fold order of our traditional service. There are others, a group smaller in number, who receive the experience of First Worship as more conducive for their worship. What is fascinating to discover is that both formats are effective, to some degree, in helping shape and form Christian identity as a distinct worldview in contrast to the cultural anthropology of an Epicurean/Enlightenment worldview. The variable it would appear, is discernable in how open someone is to either format. This dynamic is also likely indicative of how pervasive the Epicurean/Enlightenment notion of the self as an independent being making choices in life continues to shape us!

## CHAPTER 5

### **What Have I Learned**

My focus with this thesis-project was to investigate whether planning and implementing worship that explicitly and intentionally seeks to invite people to understand their lives as a part of God's revealed narrative for creation could become the source of transformation in their lives. I hoped to discover whether such an approach to planning and implementing biblically explicit worship would guide their lives. In summary, I wanted to learn whether worship approached in this way could successfully invite individuals and a congregation to adopt a theological anthropology for life. Does worship which seeks to make explicit God's biblical narrative lead and encourage a congregation to make God's unique revealed narrative for human life the framework and source for its transformation? Moreover, I wanted to learn and discover whether this transformation was possible in our congregation using the traditional format of the Service for the Lord's Day, as well as, a more informal "missional" format. My conclusions are mixed.

On one hand, I have discovered some evidence that indicates explicitly making God's narrative for human life the anchor for congregational worship is effective in guiding human transformation in congregational life. On the other hand, and at the same time, I have discovered that confronting the dominant cultural anthropology of an Epicurean/Enlightenment ethos, by intentionally posing the

counter-point of a biblically anchored theological anthropology through worship, has definite limits. At least during the period of this study, worship alone, it seems, was not enough to transform our deeply inculcated cultural ethos of individual choice. A cultural ethos, wherein individuals are understood as sovereign moral agents exercising choices that match their particular proclivities and experiences, in contrast to a theological anthropology which frames human life as the pursuit of an obedient response to God' revealed will. Nonetheless, worship is the time when a congregation gathers, and can be a significant source of congregational transformation, as well as, individual transformation. I believe that explicitly biblically anchored worship can serve as a source of transformation in a congregation, but such changes take time in human beings, and the relatively short period of time for this study has not allowed me to draw an absolutely determinative conclusion. However, I have drawn several preliminary conclusions.

### **First Conclusion**

As I have shown, a revealed theological anthropology of human life is categorically distinct from the Epicurean/Enlightenment anthropology of humanity in that God is considered absolutely sovereign; the ultimate arbitrator of what is right and wrong. Within the Reformed Tradition, of which I am a part, this is expressed by the phrase "The Total Sovereignty of God." In distinction, within the Epicurean/Enlightenment anthropology that dominates our cultural moment, it is

the individual who is sovereign, and it is the individual who decides what is right and wrong based on human reasoning and human experiences, without reference to transcendent revealed truth. It is the dissonance, or separation, between these two anthropologies for human life that I believe a biblically anchored worship can speak. I still suspect worship which is intentional about telling God's narrative for human life can challenge and subvert the Epicurean/Enlightenment worldview of worshippers, but it takes time. At least, I conclude, such transformation takes longer than the three years our congregation has intentionally pursued it.

As I noted in Chapter 2, Keller, Wright, and Horton, along with others, have advocated that congregational worship needs to be anchored in the unique biblical witness of who God is, and who we are as his creation. Put simply, worship is a prime opportunity to define congregational identity, and in turn (to some degree), shape individual identity. Therefore, I do believe the basic framework of a congregation's worship is well served when a biblical theological anthropology of human life lived in relationship with a sovereign God is affirmed and reinforced. Worship that seeks to make explicit God's revealed narrative for human life, by its very character and foundational assumptions, serves as a fundamental invitation for human beings to understand their lives as subjects before a sovereign God.

As previously noted, the biblical narrative reveals that it is God alone who has created humanity, and all that is "seen and unseen." In a scriptural worldview

framework, human beings are not co-creators of divine Truth, human beings are created to respond to divine Truth. So, within this theological anthropology wherein God is sovereign, the biblical narrative reveals that God has created humanity to live in distinct and particular ways. Human beings are invited by God to live their lives responding to his revealed divine will. This is the sovereign God who the Bible invites us to worship, and it is to this theological anthropology that worship can invite people to live.

### **Second Conclusion**

I suspect that this effort to encourage individuals, and the congregations in which they worship, to seek transformation in accord with a biblically revealed theological anthropology will be most effective when such worship is a part of a larger, more comprehensive effort by a congregation to guide its transformation by God's story, and not the story of the culture around it.

So, with God's narrative as the foundation for worship in a congregation, what else can we do to encourage transformation in accord with a theological anthropology that is revealed in Scripture? As I have earlier noted, Alan Hirsch and Tim Catchim advocate in their book *The Permanent Revolution* that congregations today are well served to rediscover and reclaim the early church's character of being a movement (a way of living), rather than a congregational identity focused on being an institution (membership in an institution). Their work speaks to the reality that

while worship is an important part of being transformed by a biblically grounded theological anthropology, there is much more to a human life than worship focused on God's narrative.

From several of the responses revealed in the focus groups for this project, it is clear that worshippers want guidance and direction from Scripture for how to live their lives. They see worship as a source for this direction. Furthermore, it seems that this desire goes far beyond the therapeutic, or self-help, advice readily available from secular sources. In their comments, these individuals expressed the desire to know transcendent truth that is transformative for human life, not merely an "improvement" on what they already know from their experiences of life. These individuals express hope that Scripture and worship will transform their lives.

Worship that is explicitly anchored in God's narrative offers just a transformative option. Specifically, worship that sets as a foremost priority the telling of God's narrative for human life can meet this identified need. This makes clear that, to some degree, our task in worship is to invite a congregation, and the individuals within it, to live in the theological anthropology of our biblically anchored worship narrative day in and day out.

Worship, then, can serve as one source for transformation according to God's narrative for human life when it is intentionally connected to circumstances and issues people face every day. Worship can be a source of transformation when it

encourages people to frame and interpret the events of their lives in light of God's narrative for human life. To state what is obvious, each individual organizes and structures their life through decisions large and small made regarding how they budget their time and energy in life. This process of deciding how to live takes place every day in our lives. While it is difficult to measure, worship does influence every day decisions.

In both concrete and abstract ways, individuals make ethical decisions every day. For example, people decide how they will respond to what is happening in the world around them, and they make decisions about what actions to take and what actions not to take. If, then, a person is consciously self-aware that he or she is a part of a movement that is defined by God's revealed narrative for human life in worship, then such decisions (at least potentially) may be consciously influenced by a biblically anchored theological anthropology, in contrast to an Epicurean/Enlightenment anthropology. However, individuals need to constantly engage in acts of self-reflection measuring the decisions they make about how to live in light of God's revealed narrative in Scripture. Biblically explicit worship can inform and guide that effort, but it needs to be connected in tangible ways with everyday decisions.

### Third Conclusion

It is for this reason that I have found Michael Horton's advocacy of using the intellectual notion of considering a human life lived according to a "script", so persuasive. For Horton, part of what biblically explicit worship does is help people give up the "script" for human life the culture around them tells them to live by, and to replace it with a biblically anchored and defined "script". It can do this through the overall liturgical assumptions employed in worship, but in particular it is through the task of preaching that we have an opportunity to intentionally invite people to rescript their lives in Christ.<sup>1</sup> Horton's basic point is that all of us adopt some sort of what I have called in this project "anthropology." The question is, are we aware of how we frame our lives? Have we consciously decided to live by one "script" over another?

With an approach to preaching that is disciplined and attentive to the task of inviting individuals to shed their culturally inculcated "script" as a sovereign individual agent in favor of a new biblically anchored and defined "script" as an obedient disciple seeking to follow Christ, we can encourage and guide transformation through worship. Through the task of preaching, there is opportunity to invite individuals to examine the question of how they frame their lives. Preaching can encourage individuals to examine their self-perception of who they are; are they

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Scott Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of Christ-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 57.

someone defined by the biblical narrative, or something else? Do we frame our life as an obedient response within God's revealed narrative, or the Epicurean/Enlightenment "script" for life that the culture around us constantly reinforces? Preaching can be an invitation to replace a culturally received anthropology with a biblically framed theological anthropology. In short, individuals can be invited to put on the "script" of Jesus Christ.

Through my research for this project, I have gained an increased appreciation for the challenge of this task. Inviting a congregation, and individuals, to consciously frame their life within a biblically revealed theological anthropology, as opposed to the culturally absorbed Epicurean/Enlightenment anthropology of individual sovereign moral agents exercising an endless set of choices based on personal experiences and perspectives, is a profound task.

For example, in my study with our Session using the book *A Field Guide for the Missional Congregation*, the results of the "before" and "after" surveys revealed very little change in the elders perspectives about the task of being the church. While the results did reveal a slightly increased awareness that our traditional format for worship assumes that anyone coming to worship already knows and accepts the underlying foundational biblical theological anthropology that supports such worship, they were reluctant to acknowledge the need to make worship more accessible for someone who does not know or accept a biblical theological

anthropology for human life. I interpret their reactions as indicative of the magnitude of the challenges before us in seeking to counter the Epicurean/Enlightenment anthropology that has in fact shaped them. The Session members essentially assume that people who come to worship either already know God's narrative, or it is incumbent on people to learn it – just as these elders have learned it.

#### **Fourth Conclusion**

In my year two project surveying the initial reactions of our new “First Worship” service format, in comparison with our traditional worship service, I was intrigued to learn how this new worship format was being perceived as primarily a change in style, not content. The people who had adopted the “First Worship” service as their service did so primarily because of the more relaxed liturgical approach, the use of more informal music featuring a variety of instruments, and peripatetic preaching style. While, there is an intentional effort to make explicit God's narrative for human life in this service, the perception is a change in style, not content. For these respondents, First Worship is essentially functioning not as a “missional” effort, but as an “attractional” tactic which happens to meet their personal proclivities and preferences.

Likewise, the people who stayed with our traditional worship format did so because they did not appreciate the style of First Worship. For these people, the

underlying theological anthropology supporting the traditional service is assumed and embraced, and the style of First Worship is distracting and off-putting. What I have discerned is that personal choice and proclivity are the determinative factors. In this project, I did not discover indications that one format or the other was more effective at making explicit God's narrative for human life. Another way to state this is to say that the format of First Worship does not appear to be more effective at inviting people to adopt a theological anthropology than is our traditional worship format.

Similarly, my year three project with three focus groups (one with traditional worship participants, one with First Worship participants, and one with elders from our current Session), revealed that both formats for worship have the potential to help people experience God's narrative in meaningful ways. As measured by their responses both formats are, to varying degrees, serving as a source for transformation in people's lives. Individuals who worship in either service report that their worship experiences are meaningful, and do help shape and guide their lives. But is our worship effective at challenging their inherited cultural anthropology of individual sovereignty in favor of God's sovereignty? There are indications that such transformations are happening, but it does not seem that worship alone is capable of countering a culture of endless choice.

Indeed, what I have discerned in these projects is something quite

unintended at the start. By offering these two distinct worship opportunities in one congregation, what we have done is actually reinforced the cultural anthropology a biblical theological anthropology is incompatible with: a culture of personal choice based on personal experience and circumstance! People are simply choosing which format for worship appeals to their personal proclivities and expectations for what worship “should” be.

So, while our efforts at making God’s narrative for human life explicit in both traditional and missional worship formats is having the effect of helping to guide personal transformation, and perhaps congregational transformation, in accord with God’s revealed narrative for human life, by offering a choice of worship formats we are unintentionally reinforcing the very anthropology the Bible invites us to reject: human sovereignty over divine sovereignty. Congregationally speaking, at some point in the future, I suspect it will more in accord with a theological anthropology to adopt one format, or the other. To continue offering a choice of worship formats for our congregation is undermining the very theological anthropology we seek to reveal and encourage.

As a congregation, we will need to discover new ways to supplement the explicit biblical narrative of God’s story for human life we are anchoring our worship in, if we truly desire transformation according to the biblical narrative. Following the insights of several of the authors included in this project (Witvliet, Smith and

Horton), these activities will integrally involve the commitment of our bodies and our time, beyond the intellectual apprehension of what the narrative of Scripture reveals.

### **Conclusion**

Across the years of Christian history, and in our present cultural moment, the need for a congregation to ground its process of transformation in the revealed theological anthropology of the Bible has been, and remains vitally important. Moreover, we read in the pages of Scripture that God continually calls people to adopt His ways in contrast to the ways of the world. Worship is one source for such transformation, and worship can do this by seeking to make explicit God's narrative for who we are as human beings in worship. The key is for our worship to relentlessly draw distinctions between who God says we are in Scripture, and what a culture unhinged from a biblical worldview says we are as human beings.

We can do this only by first making clear that such a theological anthropology is distinct from the cultural anthropology of the Epicurean/Enlightenment culture that is dominant around us. A congregation can do seek to do this through a variety of worship formats. Regardless, of how a congregation desires to worship, formal or informal, liturgically scripted or more free flowing, the necessary thread is that it be explicitly grounded in God's definitive revealed narrative for human life, and not from extra-biblical influences. Only then, can our worship present a compelling and

urgent narrative for human life that is unknown from any other source.

## APPENDIX A

### Presentation Notes from Session Study 2014

#### A Field Guide for the Missional Congregation

##### Study Session #1

February 6, 2014

\*Introduction: I invite you to join with me in the task of examining how we are called to be the church of Jesus Christ in this time and in this place.

\*The Plan: Devote approximately 30 minutes at the beginning of our stated meetings in February, March, and April to engage in a discussion grounded in the question of congregational transformation in a changed and changing world.

\*Our sessions together will be incorporated in my first year project for my D. Min.

\*Handout Surveys: No names. Do front and back of page. Two different instruments designed to gather different but related data. We will do the same surveys at the conclusion of our April session.

\*Review of Chapters 1-3 "A Field Guide For the Missional Congregation"

Chapter #1:

The cultural landscape has changed;

We no longer have a privileged place in society

We can no longer rely on the schools or civil discourse to teach our story – God's narrative.

Denominational influence in culture is almost nil

\*McNeal's 6 changed realities: The Decline of Christendom

1. The collapse of church culture
2. Requires shift from church growth to kingdom growth
3. Need to release people for ministry
4. Increased attention to spiritual formation
5. Shift from planning to preparation
6. Critical for a Return to Apostolic Leadership

\*What is the Nature and Character of the Church?

- Traditional view of congregations is that we are the local franchise for the faith.
- In this model we assume realities that no longer exist
  - People are not necessarily looking for a church
  - People may or may not know the story
  - People will respond if the right formula is found

\*The Primary Proof Text (Warrant) for defining the mission of the church in Constantinian Christianity has been Matthew 28:18-20.

- It reveals a certain imperial view. We have the truth and you need it. It invests the church with the responsibility to define what is of God and what is not.
- It serves the needs of the institutional church in that it privileges the particular precepts and doctrines of established orthodoxy.
- THIS WORLD HAS DISINTINGRATED! It worked well in modernity, but not in postmodernity wherein sources of authority and meaning have become decentralized.

\*Alan Roxburgh Book "Joining God in the Neighborhood". Poses another text as more suitable for our current time and place. Luke 10:1-12.

- The church is sent as God sends
- The church's task becomes more about seeking where God already is and less about defining doctrine and traditions.
- Pg.141, "We, the churches of North America, are being called to reorient ourselves , to be converted all over again in a way that may be more radical than the 16<sup>th</sup> century reformations.
- More about seeking the hospitality of the stranger and entering into relationship than exercising power over the world.

\*Invite you to consider this thought:

"Traditionally, we in the church have sought to create a mission for the church that is anchored in and powered by God's Word in scripture. However, the actual witness of scripture (Gospels and Letters) reveals that the situation is more that GOD HAS A MISSION, and we in the church are called to join after it.

## **STUDY SESSION #2**

**MARCH 12, 2014**

### **\*Chapters 4, 5, & 6 in "A Field Guide for the Missional Congregation"**

\*Last month we concluded with the question of *whether the traditional notion of the church's mission as anchored in and growing out of scripture has been misunderstood and wrongly applied across the centuries.*

- On the question of what is **the mission** of the church, to frame the question in this way places the church in the central position. It is the church that defines and interprets scripture and then shares it with

the world. It is a perspective on work of the church that puts the church above scripture.

- Increasingly, after close examination of the NT, *it seems that a more scriptural way to understand the nature and purpose of the church is to see the church as participating in God's mission.* This manner of framing the question of mission puts God in the center – not the church.

**\*The First Transformational Key: A Clear Vision of What the Church is called to be and do means that it is likely to grow more than a church that lacks it. [page 43]**

**\*In Chapter 4 Rouse/Gelder encourage the congregation to discern where its true focus is? Is it inward on itself? Caring for its own, and providing religious goods and service, or is it outward in focus intent on fostering and nurturing discipleship?**

**\*Second Transformational Key:** A missional congregation focuses on becoming a discipling community and is therefore more likely to develop a healthy life that moves beyond institutional survival or simply serving its own membership.

- To be such a disciple-making community requires us to find a “voice” that speaks the gospel to people who have not yet appropriated it.
- Ask questions such as, “What language do we use?” “What activities (not programs) will interact with people?”

**\*Called to leave behind the Christendom model of church. More than a source for religious goods and services. Church through the lens of Christendom is opaque today.**

1. Society no longer supportive
2. Cannot assume everyone is a Christian
3. Not about just serving our own
4. Finances are not certain or guaranteed
5. Pastors cannot be the only evangelists

**\*Generational Challenges:**

- 65% of Builders active in church
- 35% of Boomers active in church
- 18% of Gen X active in church
- 4% of Millennials are active in church

**\*Why it matters to leadership?** Builders see the church through a chaplaincy model dispensing religious goods and service. Millennials are looking not for a chaplain church but an activist church embodying the gospel and Jesus Christ.

1. **The challenge is that most congregations are led by Builders/Boomers.**

**\*Transformation toward a more disciple-making congregation: [page 61]**

- Less focus on membership growth and more on equipping people for authentic discipleship
- Less focus on structure of congregational life and more on empowering and freeing people for discipleship.

**\*Transforming the Leadership by Focusing on Discipleship: [page 64]**

1. Move away from a business model for meetings
2. Deliberate focus on equipping ministry in the congregation
3. More time in Bible study
4. Let some activities and programs die...
5. Communicate, communicate, communicate

**\*Third Transformation Key:** Develop Healthy Spirit-led leadership that can cultivate a positive climate change within the congregation. [Page 70]

- Leaders come in all shapes, sizes, and colors! It is the core task of a leader to be transformative.

**\*The church is always being formed and re-formed! By the Holy Spirit. Everything is provisional! This is the missional challenge. To CHANGE! [72]**

1. Churches that stall fail to properly contextualize
2. Churches that stall fail to avoid overly contextualizing!

**\*Ron Heifetz/Marty Linsky: ADAPTIVE CHANGE vs Technical change [page 74]**

- Change in pastors is technical change. Change is what the pastor does is adaptive change
- Change in programs, or expansion in programs, is technical change. Change in venue and focus of activity is adaptive change.
- Adaptive change means fundamental change in core values
- Implementing adaptive change requires a new range of practices applied with flexibility and creativity in rapidly changing contexts and circumstances.

**\*To Lead With Adaptive Change Requires A Climate Change in Leadership and Congregation. [74]**

- Essentially, each step better connects people with people and the community.
- Get Focused – learn God’s will. Discern God’s will, not just ourselves but for our community.
- Set People Free – Practice transparency. Speak truth. Name hard realities and situations. There is injustice. There is poverty. There is racism. No decision is made in a vacuum.

- Take Action – Do not be afraid to act to follow God. Be bold! Take risks!
- Expect Surprises – the Holy Spirit is dynamic not static. There will be twists and turns. We cannot always plan everything by the numbers.
- Be Hopeful – God has promised HIS presence. We are not alone. There will always be resistance to following the Holy Spirit. Remember God is in charge.

**\*Transformation Requires a Supportive Staff and Lay Leadership: Unity is the key. The leadership must be on the same page. Dissension is defeating. Not a uniformity of thought, but a unity of support. [82]**

- Develop and work toward a sense of team. No cult of personality, pastoral or lay leader. But a team in unison.
- Focus on remembering that congregation's serve God's purposes, not ours.
- The over- arching message in Scripture is divine reconciliation. Congregations can either be witnesses to that or not.

**\*Questions? April: Chapters 7, 8, & 9, Epilogue**

### **Study Session #3** **April 10, 2014**

**\*Chapters 7, 8,9 & Epilogue**

**\*Chapter 7: Conflict is normal.**

Transformational Key #5: Missional Spirit led churches stay the course when conflict arises by practicing truth telling as an opportunity for learning and growth together. [96]

- Conflict is normal and should be expected.
- The KEY is how will a congregation face and seek resolution?
- Often, when a pastoral change occurs after about 5 years the "white water" mark is hit. Peril emerges. The honeymoon is over. Familiarity brings both comfort and contempt. Too often either the pastor, or lay leaders jump ship. However, for transformation to happen BOTH are called to stay the course.
- Rumors and misinformation are going to happen when transparency is not practiced.
- IMPORTANT to confront the "someone said" criticism!!!

**\*Chapter 8: Stewardship is Central to Christian Identity**

Transformational Key #6: To move forward in mission it is necessary to

practice stewardship toward financial viability

- The biblical notion of stewardship is the idea of taking care of SOMEONE ELSE'S gifts!
- It is central to Christian identity. How we approach and care for our finances reflects our priorities.
- Resist the temptation: A culture of scarcity vs. a culture of abundance.
- PASTOR needs to talk about money.

### **\*Chapter 9: Change is Normal**

Transformational Key #7: It is important to celebrate our successes along the way and especially the accomplishments of others!

- Sometimes change occurs slowly, sometimes faster, but things are always changing! We live in a time of rapid change.
- Sometimes changes are incremental sometimes they are monumental. The missional church must be sensitive to and aware of the changes in the community.
- Change can be both negative and positive. Yet the missional church is aware and sensitive to the changes. Asking questions: What needs are there? What opportunities? What do we need to differently?
- Recognize that NOT EVERYONE will be happy about change.
  - Status quo is more comfortable
  - Slow decline is more comfortable than change

### **\*Questions? Retake survey.**

## APPENDIX B

### SURVEYS USED WITH SESSION STUDY

#### I. TASKS OF THE CHURCH

- A. Listed below are a number of tasks that a local church is likely to perform. Please respond to each item by indicating whether you are *generally satisfied* with your congregation's current performance of the task; or, whether you feel your congregation *needs to give it more emphasis* (that is, needs to do more of it or do it better); or, whether you feel the task currently *receives too much emphasis*?

	<i>Needs to Give More Emphasis (1)</i>	<i>Generally Satisfied (2)</i>	<i>Receives Too Much Emphasis (3)</i>
1. Providing worship that deepens members' experience of God and the Christian tradition	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]
2. Providing worship that expresses the Gospel in contemporary language and forms	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]
3. Providing Christian education for children and youth	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]
4. Providing Christian education programs for adults	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]
5. Helping members deepen their personal and spiritual relationship with God	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]
6. Sharing the good news of the Gospel with the unchurched	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]

- |  |     |     |     |
|--|-----|-----|-----|
| 7. Engaging in acts of charity and service for persons in need   | [ ] | [ ] | [ ] |
| 8. Encouraging members to act on the relationship of the Christian faith to social, political, and economic issues | [ ] | [ ] | [ ] |
| 9. Providing a caring ministry for the sick, shut-ins, those in crisis, and the bereaved                           | [ ] | [ ] | [ ] |
| 10. Providing pastoral counseling to help members deal with personal problems                                      | [ ] | [ ] | [ ] |
| 11. Providing fellowship opportunities for members   | [ ] | [ ] | [ ] |
| 12. Helping members understand their use of money, time and talents as expressions of Christian stewardship        | [ ] | [ ] | [ ] |
| 13. Supporting the world mission of the church through study and giving  | [ ] | [ ] | [ ] |
| 14. Helping members discover their own gifts for ministry and service  | [ ] | [ ] | [ ] |

Please read over the preceding list of 14 church tasks, and answer the following question by writing in the number of the appropriate task.  
Overall, which one task does your congregation do best?

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# STUDYING CONGREGATIONS

## CONGREGATIONAL IDENTITY

Listed below are several alternatives touching upon important dimensions of a church's identity. Using the seven point scale between each set of alternatives, please circle the number that best describes where your congregation falls, "1" meaning most like the characteristic on the left, "7" meaning most like the characteristic on the right, "4" meaning an equal mix of both.

- |  |               |  |
|--|---------------|--|
| 1. Our church is more influenced by history and tradition.   | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Our church is more influenced by contemporary ideas and trends.  |
| 2. Members are similar in values and lifestyle to the people who live immediately around the church. | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Members are very different in values and lifestyle from people who live immediately around the church. |
| 3. Our church is very involved with the community around the church.                                 | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Our church is not at all involved with the community around the church.                                |
| 4. Our church is primarily oriented to serving members.  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Our church is primarily oriented to serving the world beyond our membership.                           |
| 5. Our congregation feels like one large family.   | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Our congregation feels like a loosely knit association of individuals and groups.                      |
| 6. Our church is known as a prestigious one in the area.   | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Our strengths notwithstanding, our church is not considered one of the "status" churches in the area.  |

7. The church's approach to social issues is basically educational, leaving any action to individual conscience.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	The church's approach to social issues is decidedly "activist." We have a proven history of taking a stand on social issues as a congregation.
8. The congregation's approach to individual salvation emphasizes education, nurture and gradual growth in the faith.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	The congregation's approach to individual salvation stresses conversion and a born-again experience.
9. Our congregation gives strong expression to its denominational identity and heritage.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	It would be difficult for a visitor to know to which denomination the congregation belongs.

## APPENDIX C

### WORSHIP SURVEYS

#### Worship Questionnaire

##### First Worship

1. In one or two sentences how would you describe the differences and similarities between First Worship and 10:30 Worship?
2. Is there anything that you love from 10:30 that is missing from First Worship?
3. What have you noticed that is different in the sermon offered at First Worship from your previous experiences at 10:30 worship?
4. In what way(s), if any, does the delivery of the sermon from outside of the pulpit affect your experience of worship?
5. How does the use of video projection during First Worship impact your experience of worship?
6. How has the act of coming forward to make an offering in First Worship changed how you see the offering within the context of worship?
7. The closing of First Worship is done differently from 10:30 Worship. What are the differences you have noticed?
8. First Worship and 10:30 Worship include music as a part of worship. How would you describe the difference in the music, and how has it affected your experience of worship?
9. What could we do differently in First Worship that would enrich your worship experience?

10. Is there any other comment(s) you would like to share to describe how First Worship has affected your worship life here at Trinity?

**Worship Questionnaire/ First Worship & 10:30 Experiences**

1. It has been said there is a different “feel” in the sanctuary between First Worship and 10:30 Worship? How would you describe the difference?
2. How would you describe the difference (if any) in the delivery of the sermon between First Worship and 10:30 Worship?
3. How would you describe the difference (if any) of the content of the sermon from First Worship to 10:30 Worship?
4. How does the worship leadership of the choir affect your experience of worship at 10:30 from what you experience at First Worship?
5. Corporate prayers are a part of both services, how would you describe the difference in how you participate in corporate prayer from First Worship to 10:30 Worship?

## APPENDIX D

### FOCUS GROUP SURVEY

#### **WORSHIP FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS**

1. What are the primary reasons you are drawn to worship?
2. What is the most spiritually moving element of worship for you?
3. How does worship facilitate encourage you to connect to God in your life?
4. How would you describe the impact of worship in your life?
5. In what way, is the act of worship connected to your daily life?

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